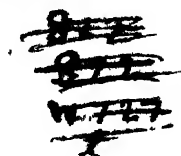


27 WAGONS FULL OF COTTON



27 Wagons Full of Cotton

And Other One-Act Plays

Tennessee Williams



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LONDON

JOHN LEHMANN

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W-727

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6 HENRIETTA STREET LONDON WC2
MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY PURNELL AND SONS LTD
PAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON

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27 Wagons Full of Cotton

A MISSISSIPPI DELTA COMEDY

*Now Eros shakes my soul, a wind
on the mountain, falling on the oaks.'*

SAPPHO

C H A R A C T E R S

JAKE MEIGHAN
A cotton-gin owner

FLORA MEIGHAN
His wife

SILVA VICARRO
Superintendent of the Syndicate Plantation

*All of the action takes place on the front porch of the
Meighans' residence near Blue Mountain, Mississippi*

27 Wagons Full of Cotton

SCENE: *The front porch of the Meighans' cottage near Blue Mountain, Mississippi. The porch is narrow and rises into a single narrow gable. There are spindling white pillars on either side supporting the porch roof and a door of Gothic design and two Gothic windows on either side of it. The peaked door has an oval of richly stained glass, azure, crimson, emerald and gold. At the windows are fluffy white curtains gathered coquettishly in the middle by baby-blue satin bows. The effect is not unlike a doll's house.*

SCENE I

It is early evening and there is a faint rosy dusk in the sky. Shortly after the curtain rises, JAKE MEIGHAN, a fat man of sixty, scrambles out the front door and races around the corner of the house carrying a gallon can of coal-oil. A dog barks at him. A car is heard starting and receding rapidly in the distance. A moment later FLORA calls from inside the house.

FLORA: Jake! I've lost m' white kid purse! (*closer to the door*) Jake? Look'n see 'f uh laid it on th' swing. (*There is a pause.*) Guess I could've left it in th' Chevy? (*She comes up to screen door.*) Jake. Look'n see if uh left it in th' Chevy. Jake? (*She steps outside in the fading rosy dusk. She switches on the porch light and stares about, slapping at gnats attracted by the light. Locusts provide the only answering voice. FLORA gives a long nasal call.*) Ja-ay—a-a-ake! (*A cow moos in the distance with the same inflection. There is a muffled explosion somewhere about half a mile away. A strange flickering glow appears, the reflection of a burst of flame. Distant voices are heard exclaiming.*)

VOICES (*skrill, cackling like hens*):

You heah that noise?

Yeah! Sound like a bomb went off!

Oh, look!

Why, it's a fire!

Where's it at? You tell?

Th' Syndicate Plantation!

Oh, my God! Let's go! (*A fire whistle sounds in the distance.*)

Henry! Start th' car! You all wanta go with us?

Yeah, we'll be right out!

Hurry, honey! (*A car can be heard starting up.*)

Be right there!

Well, hurry.

VOICE (*just across the dirt road*): Missus Meighan?

FLORA: Ye-ah?

VOICE: Ahn't you goin' th' fire?

FLORA: I wish I could but Jake's gone off in th' Chevy.

VOICE: Come awn an' go with us, honey!

FLORA: Oh, I cain't an' leave th' house wide open! Jake's gone off with th' keys. What do you all think it is on fire?

VOICE: 'Th' Syndicate Plantation!

FLORA: Th' Syndicate Plan-ta-tion? (*The car starts off and recedes.*)

Oh, my Go-od! (*She climbs laboriously back up on the porch and sits on the swing which faces the front. She speaks tragically to herself.*)

Nobody! Nobody! Never! Never! Nobody! (*Locusts can be heard. A car is heard approaching and stopping at a distance back of house. After a moment JAKE ambles casually up around the side of the house.*)

FLORA (*in a petulant babyish tone*): Well!

JAKE: Whatsamatter, Baby?

FLORA: I never known a human being could be that mean an' thoughtless!

JAKE: Aw, now, that's a mighty broad statement fo' yqu to make, Mrs. Meighan. What's the complaint this time?

FLORA: Just flew out of the house without even sayin' a word!

JAKE: What's so bad about that?

FLORA: I told you I had a headache comin' on an' had to have a dope, there wassen a single bottle lef' in th' house, an' you said,

Yeah, get into yuh things 'n' we'll drive in town right away! So I get into m' things an' I cain't find m' white kid purse. Then I remember I left it on th' front seat of th' Chevy. I come out here t' git it. Where are you? Gone off! Without a word! Then there's a big explosion! Feel my heart!

JAKE: Feel my baby's heart? (*He puts a band on her buge bosom.*)

FLORA: Yeah, just you feel it, poundin' like a hammer! How'd I know what happened? You not here, just disappeared somewhere!

JAKE (*sharply*): Shut up! (*He pushes her head roughly.*)

FLORA: Jäke! What did you do that fo'?

JAKE: I don't like how you holler! Holler ev'ry thing you say!

FLORA: What's the matter with you?

JAKE: Nothing's the matter with me.

FLORA: Well, why did you go off?

JAKE: I didn' go' off!

FLORA: You certainly *did* go off! Try an' tell me that you never went off when I just now seen an' heard you drivin' back in th' car? What uh you take me faw? No sense a-tall?

JAKE: If you got sense you keep your big mouth shut!

FLORA: Don't talk to me like that!

JAKE: Come on inside.

FLORA: I won't. Selfish an' inconsiderate, that's what you are! I told you at supper. There's not a bottle of Coca-Cola left on th' place. You said, Okay, right after supper we'll drive on over to th' White Star drugstore an' lay in a good supply. When I come out of th' house——

JAKE: (*He stands in front of her and grips her neck with both hands.*) Look here! Listen to what I tell you!

FLORA: *Jake!*

JAKE: Shhh! Just listen, Baby.

FLORA: Lenime go! G'damn you, le' go my throat!

JAKE: Jus' try an' concentrate on what I tell yuh!

FLORA: Tell me what?

JAKE: I ain't been off th' po'ch.

FLORA: Huh!

JAKE: I ain't been off th' front po'ch! Not since supper! Understand that, now?

FLORA: Jake, honey, you've gone out of you' mind!

JAKE: Maybe so. Never you mind. Just get that straight an' keep it in your haid. I ain't been off the porch of this house since supper.

FLORA: But you sure as God *was* off it! (*He twists her wrist.*)
Ouuuu! Stop it, stop it, stop it!

JAKE: Where have I been since supper?

FLORA: Here, here! On th' porch! Fo' God's sake, quit that twistin'!

JAKE: Where have I been?

FLORA: Porch! Porch! Here!

JAKE: Doin' what?

FLORA: *Jake!*

JAKE: Doin' what?

FLORA: Lemme go! Christ, Jake! Let loose! Quit twistin', you'll break my wrist!

JAKE (*laughing between his teeth*): Doin' what? What doin'? Since supper?

FLORA (*crying out*): How in hell do I know!

JAKE: 'Cause you was right here with me, all the time, for every second! You an' me, sweetheart, was sittin' here together on th' swing, just swingin' back an' forth every minute since supper! You got that in your haid good now?

FLORA (*whimpering*): Le'-go!

JAKE: Got it? In your haid good now?

FLORA: Yeh, yeh, yeh—leggo!

JAKE: What was I doin', then?

FLORA: Swingin'! For Christ's sake—swingin'! (*He releases her. She whimpers and rubs her wrist but the impression is that the experience was not without pleasure for both parties. She groans and whimpers. He grips her loose curls in his hand and bends her head back. He plants a long wet kiss on her mouth.*)

FLORA (*whimpering*): Mmmmm-hmmmm! Mmmmm! Mmmmm!

JAKE (*buskily*): Tha's my swee' baby girl.

FLORA: Mmmmm! Hurt! Hurt!

JAKE: Hurt?

FLORA: Mmmmm! Hurt!

JAKE: Kiss?

FLORA: Mmmmm!

JAKE: Good?

FLORA: Mmmmm . . .

JAKE: Good! Make little room.

FLORA: Too hot!

JAKE: Go on, make little room.

FLORA: Mmmmm . . .

JAKE: Cross patch?

FLORA: Mmmmmmm.

JAKE: Whose baby? Big? Sweet?

FLORA: Mmmmm! Hurt!

JAKE: Kiss! (*He lifts her wrist to his lips and makes gobbling sounds.*)

FLORA (*giggling*): Stop! Silly! Mmmmm!

JAKE: What would I do if you was a big piece of cake?

FLORA: Silly.

JAKE: Gobble! Gobble!

FLORA: Oh, you——

JAKE: What would I do if you was angel food cake? Big white piece with lots of nice thick icin'?

FLORA (*giggling*): Quit!

JAKE: Gobble, gobble, gobble!

FLORA (*squealing*): Jake!

JAKE: Huh?

FLORA: You tick-le!

JAKE: Answer little question!

FLORA: Wh-at?

JAKE: Where I been since supper?

FLORA: Off in the Chevy! (*He instantly seizes the wrist again. She shrieks.*)

JAKE: Where've I been since supper?

FLORA: Po'ch! Swing!

JAKE: Doin' what?

FLORA: *Swingin'!* Oh, Christ, Jake, let loose!

JAKE: Hurt?

FLORA: Mmmmm . . .

JAKE: Good?

FLORA (*whispering*): Mmmmm . . .

JAKE: Now you know where I been an' what I been doin' since supper?

FLORA: Yeah . . .

JAKE: Case anybody should ask?

FLORA: Who's going to ast?

JAKE: Never mind who's goin' t' ast, just you know the answers! Uh-huh?

FLORA: Uh-huh. (*Lisping babyishly.*) This is where you been. Settin' on th' swing since we had supper. Swingin'—back an' fo'th—back an' fo'th. . . . You didn' go off in th' Chevy. (*Slowly.*) An' you was awf'ly surprised w'en th' syndicate fire broke out! (*Jake slaps her.*) Jake!

JAKE: Everything' you said is awright. But don't you get ideas.

FLORA: Ideas?

JAKE: A woman like you's not made to have ideas. Made to be hugged an' squeezed!

FLORA (*babyishly*): Mmmm. . . .

JAKE: But not for ideas. So don't you have ideas. (*He rises.*) Go out an' get in th' Chevy.

FLORA: We goin' to th' fire?

JAKE: No. We ain' goin' no fire. We goin' in town an' get us a case a dopes because we're hot an' thirsty.

FLORA (*vaguely, as she rises*): I lost m' white—kid—purse . . .

JAKE: It's on the seat of th' Chevy whe' you left it.

FLORA: Whe' you goin'?

JAKE: I'm goin' in t' th' toilet. I'll be right out. (*He goes inside, letting the screen door slam. FLORA shuffles to the edge of the steps and stands there with a slight idiotic smile. She begins to descend, letting herself down each time with the same foot, like a child just learning to walk. She stops at the bottom of the steps and stares at the sky, vacantly and raptly, her fingers closing gently around the bruised wrist. JAKE can be heard singing inside.*)

' My baby don' care fo' rings
or other expensive things—
My baby just cares—fo'—me! '

CURTAIN

SCENE II

It is just after noon. The sky is the colour of the satin bows on the window curtains—a translucent, innocent blue. Heat devils are shimmering over the flat Delta country and the peaked white front of the house is like a shrill exclamation. Jake's gin is busy; beard like a steady pulse across the road. A delicate lint of cotton is drifting about in the atmosphere.

JAKE appears, a large and purposeful man with arms like bams covered with a fuzz of fine blond hair. He is followed by SILVA VICARRO who is the Superintendent of the Syndicate Plantation where the fire occurred last night VICARRO is a rather small and wiry man of dark Latin looks and nature. He wears whipcord breeches, laced boots, and a white undershirt. He has a Roman Catholic medallion on a chain about his neck.

JAKE (*with the good-natured condescension of a very large man for a small one*): Well, suh, all I got to say is you're a mighty lucky little fellow.

VICARRO: Lucky? In what way?

JAKE: That I can take on a job like this right now! Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton's a pretty big piece of bus'ness, Mr.

VICARRO. (*Stopping at the steps.*) Baby! (*He bites off a piece of tobacco plug.*) What's yuh firs' name?

VICARRO: Silva.

JAKE: How do you spell it?

VICARRO: S-I-L-V-A.

JAKE: Silva! Like a silver lining! Ev'ry cloud has got a silver lining. What does that come from? The Bible?

VICARRO (*sitting on the steps*): No. The Mother Goose Book.

JAKE: Well, suh, you sure are lucky that I can do it. If I'd been busy like I was two weeks ago I would 've turned it down. *BABY! COME OUT HERE A MINUTE!* (*There is a vague response from inside.*)

VICARRO: Lucky. Very lucky. (*He lights a cigarette. FLORA pushes open the screen door and comes out. She has on her watermelon pink silk dress and is clutching against her body the big white kid purse with her initials on it in big nickel plate.*)

JAKE (*proudly*): Mr. Vicarro—I want you to meet Mrs. Meighan. Baby, this is a very down-at-the-mouth young fellow I want you to cheer up fo' me. He thinks he's out of luck because his cotton gin burnt down. He's got twenty-seven wagons full of cotton to be ginned out on a hurry-up order from his most impo'tant customers in Mobile. Well, suh, I said to him, Mr. Vicarro, you're to be congratulated—not because it burnt down, but because I happen to be in a situation to take the business over. Now you tell him just how lucky he is!

FLORA (*nervously*): Well, I guess he don't see how it was lucky to have his gin burned down.

VICARRO (*acidly*): No, ma'am.

JAKE (*quickly*): Mr. Vicarro. Some fellows marry a girl when she's little an' tiny. They like a small figure. See? Then, when the girl gets comfo'tably settled down—what does she do? Puts on flesh-of cou'sel!

FLORA (*bashfully*): Jake!

JAKE: Now then! How do they react? Accept it as a matter of cou'se, as something which 'as been ordained by nature? Nope!

No, suh, not a bit! They sta't to feeling abused. They think that fate must have a grudge against them because the little woman is not so little as she used to be. Because she's gone an' put on a matronly figure. Well, suh, that's at the root of a lot of domestic trouble. However, Mr. Vicarro, I never made that mistake. When I fell in love with this baby-doll I've got here, she was just the same size then that you see her today.

FLORA (*crossing sbyly to porch rail*): Jake . . .

JAKE (*grinning*): A woman not large but tremendous! That's how I liked her—tremendous! I told her right off, when I slipped th' ring on her finger, one Satiddy night in a boathouse on Moon Lake—I said to her, Honey, if you take off one single pound of that body—I'm going to quit yuh! I'm going to quit yuh, I said, the minute I notice you've started to take off weight!

FLORA: Aw, Jake—please!

JAKE: ¹⁴I don't want nothing little, not in a woman. I'm not after nothing *petite*, as the Frenchmen call it. This is what I wanted—and what I got! Look at her, Mr. Vicarro. Look at her blush! (*He grips the back of FLORA's neck and tries to turn her around.*)

FLORA: Aw, quit, Jake! Quit, will yuh?

JAKE: See what a doll she is? (*FLORA turns suddenly and spansks him with the kid purse. He cackles and runs down the steps. At the corner of the house, he stops and turns.*) Baby, you keep Mr. Vicarro comfo'table while I'm ginnin' out that twenty-seven wagons full of cotton. Th' good-neighbour policy, Mr. Vicarro. You do me a good turn an' I'll do you a good one! Be see'n' yuh! So long, Baby! (*He walks away with an energetic stride.*)

VICARRO: The good-neighbour policy! (*He sits on the porch steps.*)

FLORA (*sitting on the swing*): Issen he out-ray-juss! (*She laughs foolishly and puts the purse in her lap. VICARRO stares gloomily across the dancing brilliance of the fields. His lip sticks out like a pouting child's. A rooster crows in the distance.*)

FLORA: I wouldn't dare to expose myself like that.

VICARRO: Expose? To what?

FLORA: The sun, I take a terrible burn. I'll never forget the burn I took one time. It was on Moon Lake one Sunday before I was

married. I never did like t' go fishin' but this young fellow, one of the Peterson boys, insisted that we go fishin'. Well, he didn't catch nothin' but jus' kep' fishin' an' fishin' an' I set there in th' boat with all that hot sun on me. I said, Stay under the willows. But he would'n' lissen to me, an' sure enough I took such an awful burn I had t' sleep on m' stummick th' nex' three nights.

VICARRO (*absently*): What did you say? You got sun-burned?

FLORA: Yes. One time on Moon Lake.

VICARRO: That's too bad. You got over it all right?

FLORA: Oh, yes. Finally. Yes.

VICARRO: That must 've been pretty bad.

FLORA: I fell in the lake once, too. Also with one of the Peterson boys. On another fishing trip. That was a wild bunch of boys, those Peterson boys. I never went out with 'em but something happened which made me wish I hadn't. One time, sun-burned. One time, nearly drowned. One time—poison ivy! Well, lookin' back on it, now, we had a good deal of fun in spite of it, though.

VICARRO: The good-neighbour policy, huh? (*He slaps his boot with the riding crop. Then he rises from steps.*)

FLORA: You might as well come up on th' po'ch an' make you'self as comfo'table as you can.

VICARRO: Uh-huh.

FLORA: I'm not much good at—makin' conversation.

VICARRO (*finally noticing her*): Now don't you bother to make conversation for my benefit, Mrs. Meighan. I'm the type that prefers a quiet understanding. (*FLORA laughs uncertainly.*) One thing I always notice about you ladies . . .

FLORA: What's that, Mr. Vicarro?

VICARRO: You always have something in your hands—to hold onto. Now that kid purse . . .

FLORA: My purse?

VICARRO: You have no reason to keep that purse in your hands. You're certainly not afraid that I'm going to snatch it!

FLORA: Oh, God, no! I wassen afraid of that!

VICARRO: That wouldn't be the good-neighbour policy, would it? But you hold onto that purse because it gives you something to get a grip on. Isn't that right?

FLORA: Yes. I always like to have something in my hands.

VICARRO: Sure you do. You feel what a lot of uncertain things there are. Gins burn down. The volunteer fire department don't have decent equipment. Nothing is any protection. The afternoon sun is hot. It's no protection. The trees are back of the house. They're no protection. The goods that dress is made of—is no protection. So what do you do, Mrs. Meighan? You pick up the white kid purse. It's solid. It's sure. It's certain. It's something to hold on to. You get what I mean?

FLORA: Yeah. I think I do.

VICARRO: It gives you a feeling of being attached to something. The mother protects the baby? No, no, no—the baby protects the mother! From being lost and empty and having nothing but lifeless things in her hands! Maybe you think there isn't much connection!

FLORA: You'll have to excuse me from thinking. I'm too lazy.

VICARRO: What's your name, Mrs. Meighan?

FLORA: Flora.

VICARRO: Mine is Silva. Something not gold but—Silva!

FLORA: Like a silver dollar?

VICARRO: No, like a silver dime! It's an Italian name. I'm a native of New Orleans.

FLORA: Then it's not sun-burn. You're natcherally dark.

VICARRO (*raising his undershirt from his belly*): Look at this!

FLORA: Mr. Vicarro!

VICARRO: Just as dark as my arm is!

FLORA: You don't have to show me! I'm not from Missouri!

VICARRO (*grinning*): Excuse me.

FLORA (*she laughs nervously*): Whew! I'm sorry to say we don't have a coke in the house. We meant to get a case of cokes las' night, but what with all the excitement going on——

VICARRO: What excitement was that?

FLORA: Oh, the fire and all.

VICARRO (*lighting a cigarette*): I shouldn't think you all would of been excited about the fire.

FLORA: A fire is always exciting. After a fire, dogs an' chickens don't sleep. I don't think our chickens got to sleep all night.

VICARRO: No?

FLORA: They cackled an' fussed an' flopped around on the roost—took on something awful! Myself, I couldn't sleep neither. I jus' lay there an' sweated all night long.

VICARRO: On account of th' fire?

FLORA: An' the heat an' mosquitoes. And I was mad at Jake.

VICARRO: Mad at Mr. Meighan? What about?

FLORA: Oh, he went off an' left me settin' here on this ole po'ch last night without a Coca-Cola on the place.

VICARRO: Went off an' left you, did he?

FLORA: Yep. Right after supper. An' when he got back the fire 'd already broke out an' instcad of drivin' in to town like he said, he decided to go an' take a look at your burnt-down cotton gin. I got smoke in my eyes an' my nose an' throat. It hurt my sinus an' I was in such a wo'n out, nervous condition, it made me cry. I cried like a baby. Finally took two teaspoons of paregoric. Enough to put an elephant to sleep. But still I stayed awake an' heard them chickens carryin' on out there!

VICARRO: It sounds like you passed a very uncomfortable night.

FLORA: Sounds like? Well, it *was*.

VICARRO: So Mr. Meighan—you say—disappeared after supper?

(*There is a pause while FLORA looks at him blankly.*)

FLORA: Huh?

VICARRO: You say Mr. Meighan was out of the house for a while after supper? (*Something in his tone makes her aware of her indiscretion.*)

FLORA: Oh—uh—just for a moment.

VICARRO: Just for a moment, huh? How long a moment? (*He stares at her very hard.*)

FLORA: What are you driving at, Mr. Vicarro?

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VICARRO: Driving at? Nothing.

FLORA: You're looking at me so funny.

VICARRO: He disappeared for a moment! Is that what he did? How long a moment did he disappear for? Can you remember, Mrs. Meighan?

FLORA: What difference does that make? What's it to you, anyhow?

VICARRO: Why should you mind me asking?

FLORA: You make this sound like I was on trial for something!

VICARRO: Don't you like to pretend like you're a witness?

FLORA: Witness of what, Mr. Vicarro?

VICARRO: Why—for instance—say—a case of arson!

FLORA (*wetting her lips*): Case of——? What is—arson?

VICARRO: The wilful destruction of property by fire. (*He slaps his boots sharply with the riding crop.*)

FLORA (*startled*): Oh! (*She nervously fingers the purse.*) Well, now, don't you go and be getting any—funny ideas.

VICARRO: Ideas about what, Mrs. Meighan?

FLORA: My husband's disappearin'—after supper. I can explain that.

VICARRO: Can you?

FLORA: Sure I can.

VICARRO: Good! How do you explain it? (*He stares at her. She looks down.*) What's the matter? Can't you collect your thoughts, Mrs. Meighan?

FLORA: No, but——

VICARRO: Your mind's a blank on the subject?

FLORA: Look here, now—— (*She squirms on the swing.*)

VICARRO: You find it impossible to remember just what your husband disappeared for after supper? You can't imagine what kind of errand it was that he went out on, can you?

FLORA: No! No, I can't!

VICARRO: But when he returned—let's see . . . The fire had just broken out at the Syndicate Plantation?

FLORA: Mr. Vicarro, I don't have the slightest idear what you could be driving at.

VICARRO: You're a very unsatisfactory witness, Mrs. Meighan.

FLORA: I never can think when people—stare straight at me.

VICARRO: Okay. I'll look away, then. (*He turns his back to her.*) Now does that improve your memory any? Now are you able to concentrate on the question?

FLORA: Huh . . .

VICARRO: No? You're not? (*He turns around again, grinning evilly.*) Well . . . shall we drop the subject?

FLORA: I sure do wish you would.

VICARRO: It's no use crying over a burnt-down gin. This world is built on the principle of tit for tat.

FLORA: What do you mean?

VICARRO: Nothing at all specific. Mind if I . . . ?

FLORA: What?

VICARRO: You want to move over a little an' make some room? (*FLORA edges aside on the swing. He sits down with her.*) I like a swing. I've always liked to sit an' rock on a swing. Relaxes you . . . You relaxed?

FLORA: Sure.

VICARRO: No, you're not. Your nerves are all tied up.

FLORA: Well, you made me feel kind of nervous. All of them questions you ast me about the fire.

VICARRO: I didn' ask you questions about the fire. I only asked you about your husband's leaving the house after supper.

FLORA: I explained that to you.

VICARRO: Sure. That's right. You did. The good-neighbour policy. That was a lovely remark your husband made about the good-neighbour policy. I see what he means by that now.

FLORA: He was thinking about President Roosevelt's speech. We sat up an' lissened to it one night last week.

VICARRO: No, I think that he was talking about something closer to home, Mrs. Meighan. You do me a good turn and I'll do you one, that was the way that he put it. You have a piece of cotton on

your face. Hold still—I'll pick it off. (*He delicately removes the lint.*) There now,

FLORA (*nervously*): Thanks.

VICARRO: There's a lot of fine cotton lint floating round in the air.

FLORA: I know there is. It irritates my nose. I think it gets up in my sinus.

VICARRO: Well, you're a delicate woman.

FLORA: Delicate? Me? Oh, no. I'm too big for that.

VICARRO: Your size is part of your delicacy, Mrs. Meighan.

FLORA: How do you mean?

VICARRO: There's a lot of you, but every bit of you is delicate. Choice. Delectable, I might say.

FLORA: Huh?

VICARRO: I mean you're altogether lacking in any—coarseness. You're soft. Fine-fibred. And smooth.

FLORA: Our talk is certainly taking a personal turn.

VICARRO: Yes. You make me think of cotton.

FLORA: Huh?

VICARRO: Cotton!

FLORA: Well! Should I say thanks or something?

VICARRO: No, just smile, Mrs. Meighan. You have an attractive smile. Dimples!

FLORA: No . . .

VICARRO: Yes, you have! Smile, Mrs. Meighan! Come on—smile! (*FLORA averts her face, smiling helplessly.*) There now. See? You've got them! (*He delicately touches one of the dimples.*)

FLORA: Please don't touch me. I don't like to be touched.

VICARRO: Then why do you giggle?

FLORA: Can't help it. You make me feel kind of hysterical, Mr. Vicarro. Mr. Vicarro——

VICARRO: Yes?

FLORA: I hope you don't think that Jake was mixed up in that fire. I swear to goodness he never left the front porch. I remember it perfectly now. We just set here on the swing till the fire broke out and then we drove in town.

VICARRO: To celebrate?

FLORA: No, no, no.

VICARRO: Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton's a pretty big piece of business to fall in your lap like a gift from the gods, Mrs. Meighan.

FLORA: I thought you said that we would drop the subject.

VICARRO: You brought it up that time.

FLORA: Well, please don't try to mix me up any more. I swear to goodness the fire had already broke out when he got back.

VICARRO: That's not what you told me a moment ago.

FLORA: You got me all twisted up. We went in town. The fire broke out an' we didn't know about it.

VICARRO: I thought you said it irritated your sinus.

FLORA: Oh, my God, you sure put words in my mouth. Maybe I'd better make us some lemonade.

VICARRO: Don't go to the trouble.

FLORA: I'll go in an' fix it direckly, but right at this moment I'm too weak to get up. I don't know why, but I can't hardly hold my eyes open. They keep falling shut. . . . I think it's a little too crowded, two on a swing. Will you do me a favour an' eat back down over there?

VICARRO: Why do you want me to move?

FLORA: It makes too much body heat when we're crowded together.

VICARRO: One body can borrow coolness from another.

FLORA: I always heard that bodies borrowed heat.

VICARRO: Not in this case. I'm cool.

FLORA: You don't seem like it to me.

VICARRO: I'm just as cool as a cucumber. If you don't believe it, touch me.

FLORA: Where?

VICARRO: Anywhere.

FLORA (*rising with great effort*): Excuse me, I got to go in. (*He pulls her back down.*) What did you do that for?

VICARRO: I don't want to be deprived of your company yet.

FLORA: Mr. Vicarro, you're gettin' awf'ly familiar.

VICARRO: Haven't you got any fun-loving spirit about you?

FLORA: This isn't fun.

VICARRO: Then why do you giggle?

FLORA: I'm ticklish! Quit switching me, will yuh?

VICARRO: I'm just shooing the flies off.

FLORA: Leave 'em be, then, please. They don't hurt nothin'.

VICARRO: I think you like to be switched.

FLORA: I don't. I wish you'd quit.

VICARRO: You'd like to be switched harder.

FLORA: No, I wouldn't.

VICARRO: That blue mark on your wrist——

FLORA: What about it?

VICARRO: I've got a suspicion.

FLORA: Of what?

VICARRO: It was twisted. By your husband.

FLORA: You're crazy.

VICARRO: Yes, it was. And you liked it.

FLORA: I certainly didn't. Would you mind moving your arm?

VICARRO: Don't be so skittish.

FLORA: Awright. I'll get up then.

VICARRO: Go on.

FLORA: I feel so weak.

VICARRO: Dizzy?

FLORA: A little bit. Yeah. My head's spinning round. I wish you would stop the swing.

VICARRO: It's not swinging much.

FLORA: But even a little's too much.

VICARRO: You're a delicate woman. A pretty big woman, too.

FLORA: So is America. Big.

VICARRO: That's a funny remark.

FLORA: Yeah. I don't know why I made it. My head's so buzzy.

VICARRO: Fuzzy?

FLORA: Fuzzy an'—buzzy . . . Is something on my arm?

VICARRO: No.

FLORA: Then what 're you brushing?

VICARRO: Sweat off.

FLORA: Leave it alone.

VICARRO: Let me wipe it. (*He brushes her arm with a handkerchief.*)

FLORA (*laughing weakly*): No, please, don't. It feels funny.

VICARRO: How does it feel?

FLORA: It tickles me All up an' down. You cut it out now. If you don't cut it out I'm going to call.

VICARRO: Call who?

FLORA: I'm going to call that nigger. The nigger that's cutting the grass across the road.

VICARRO: Go on. Call, then.

FLORA (*weakly*): Hey! Hey, boy!

VICARRO: Can't you call any louder?

FLORA: I feel so funny. What is the matter with me?

VICARRO: You're just relaxing. You're big. A big type of woman. I like you. Don't get so excited.

FLORA: I'm not, but you——

VICARRO: What am I doing?

FLORA: Suspicious. About my husband and ideas you have about me.

VICARRO: Such as what?

FLORA: He burnt your gin down. He didn't. And I'm not a big piece of cotton. (*She pulls herself up.*) I'm going inside.

VICARRO (*rising*): I think that's a good idea.

FLORA: I said I was. Not you.

VICARRO: Why not me?

FLORA: Inside it might be crowded, with you an' me.

VICARRO: Three's a crowd. We're two.

FLORA: You stay out. Wait here.

VICARRO: What'll you do?

FLORA: I'll make us a pitcher of nice cold lemonade.

VICARRO: Okay. You go on in.

FLORA: What'll you do?

VICARRO: I'll follow.

FLORA: That's what I figured you might be aiming to do. We'll both stay out.

VICARRO: In the sun?

FLORA: We'll sit back down in th' shade. (*He blocks her.*) Don't stand in my way.

VICARRO: You're standing in mine.

FLORA: I'm dizzy.

VICARRO: You ought to lie down.

FLORA: How can I?

VICARRO: Go in.

FLORA: You'd follow me.

VICARRO: What if I did?

FLORA: I'm afraid.

VICARRO: You're starting to cry.

FLORA: I'm afraid!

VICARRO: What of?

FLORA: Of you.

VICARRO: I'm little.

FLORA: I'm dizzy. My knees are so weak they're like water. I've got to sit down.

VICARRO: Go in.

FLORA: I can't.

VICARRO: Why not?

FLORA: You'd follow.

VICARRO: Would that be so awful?

FLORA: You've got a mean look in your eyes and I don't like the whip. Honest to God he never. He didn't, I swear!

VICARRO: Do what?

FLORA: The fire . . .

VICARRO: Go on.

FLORA: Please don't!

VICARRO: Don't what?

FLORA: Put it down. The whip, please put it down. Leave it out here on the porch.

VICARRO: What are you scared of?

FLORA: You.

VICARRO: Go on. (*She turns helplessly and moves to the screen. He pulls it open.*)

FLORA: Don't follow. Please don't follow! (*She sways uncertainly. He presses his hand against her. She moves inside. He follows. The door is shut quietly. The gin pumps slowly and steadily across the road. From inside the bouse there is a wild and despairing cry. A door is slammed. The cry is repeated more faintly.*)

CURTAIN

SCENE III

It is about nine o'clock the same evening. Although the sky behind the bouse is a dusky rose colour; a full September moon of almost garish intensity gives the front of the bouse a ghostly brilliance. Dogs are howling like demons across the prostrate fields of the Delta.

The front porch of the Meighans is empty.

After a moment the screen door is pushed slowly open and FLORA MEIGHAN emerges gradually. Her appearance is ravaged. Her eyes have a vacant limpidity in the moonlight, her lips are slightly apart. She moves with her hands stretched gropingly before her till she has reached a pillar of the porch. There she stops and stands moaning a little. Her hair hangs loose and disordered. The upper part of her body is unclothed except for a torn pink band about her breasts. Dark streaks are visible on the bare shoulders and arms and there is a large discoloration along one cheek. A dark trickle, now congealed, descends from one corner of her mouth. These more apparent tokens she covers with one hand when JAKE comes up on the porch. He is now heard approaching, singing to himself.

JAKE: By the light—by the light—by the light—Of the sil-very mo-o-on! (*Instinctively FLORA draws back into the sharply etched shadow from the porch roof. JAKE is too tired and triumphant to notice her appearance.*) How's a baby? (*FLORA utters a moaning grunt.*) Tired? Too tired t' talk? Well, that's how I feel. Too tired t' talk. Too goddam tired t' speak a friggin' word! (*He lets himself down on the steps, groaning and without giving FLORA more than a glance.*) Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton. That's how much I've ginned since ten this mawnin'. A man-size job.

FLORA (*bushily*): Uh-huh. . . . A man-size—job. . . .

JAKE: *Twen-ty sev-en wa-gons full of cot-ton!*

FLORA³ (*senselessly repeating*): *Twen-ty sev-en wa-gons full of cot-ton!* (*A dog howls. FLORA utters a breathless laugh.*)

JAKE: What're you laughin' at, honey? Not at me, I hope.

FLORA: No. . . .

JAKE: That's good. The job that I've turned out is nothing to laugh at. I drove that pack of niggers like a mule-skinner. They don't have a brain in their bodies. All they got is bodies. You got to drive, drive, drive. I don't even seen how niggers eat without somebody to tell them to put the food in their moufs! (*She laughs again, like water spilling out of her mouth.*) Huh! You got a laugh like a—— Christ. A terrific day's work I finished.

FLORA (*slowly*): I would'n' brag—about it. . . .

JAKE: I'm not braggin' about it, I'm just sayin' I done a big day's work, I'm all wo'n out an' I want a little appreciation, not cross speeches. Honey. . . .

FLORA: I'm not—(*She laughs again.*)—makin' cross speeches.

JAKE: To take on a big piece of work an' finish it up an' mention the fact that it's finished I wouldn't call braggin'.

FLORA: You're not the only one's—done a big day's—work.

JAKE: Who else that you know of? (*There is a pause.*)

FLORA: Maybe you think that I had an easy time. (*Her laughter spills out again.*)

JAKE: You're laughin' like you been on a goddam jag. (*FLORA*

laughs.) What did you get pissed on? Roach poison or citronella? I think I make it pretty easy for you, workin' like a mule-skinner so you can hire you a nigger to do the wash an' take the house-work on. An elephant woman who acks as frail as a kitten, that's the kind of a woman I got on m' hands.

FLORA: Sure. . . . (*She laughs.*) You make it easy!

JAKE: I've yet t' see you lift a little finger. Even gotten too lazy t' put you' things on. Round the house ha'f naked all th' time. Y' live in a cloud. All you can think of is "Give me a Coca-Cola!" Well, you better look out. They got a new bureau in the guvamint files. It's called U.W. Stands for Useless Wimmen. Tha's secret plans on foot t' have 'em shot! (*He laughs at his joke.*)

FLORA: Secret—plans—on foot?

JAKE: T' have 'em *shot*.

FLORA: That's good. I'm glad t' hear it. (*She laughs again.*)

JAKE: I come home tired an' you cain't wait t' peck at me. What 're you cross about now?

FLORA: I think it was a mistake.

JAKE: What was a mistake?

FLORA: Fo' you t' fool with th' Syndicate—Plantation. . . .

JAKE: I don't know about that. We wuh kind of up-against it, honey. Th' Syndicate buyin' up all th' lan' aroun' herd an' turnin' the ole croppers off it without their wages—mighty near busted ev'ry mercantile store in Two Rivers County! An' then they build their own gin to gin their own cotton. It looked for a while like I was stuck up high an' dry. But when the gin burnt down an' Mr. Vicarro decided he'd better throw a little bus'ness my way—I'd say the situation was much improved!

FLORA (*she laughs weakly*): Then maybe you don't understand th' good-neighbour—policy.

JAKE: Don't understand it? Why, I'nt, the boy that invented it.

FLORA: Huh-huh! What an—*invention*! All I can say is—I hope you're satisfied now that you've ginned out—twenty-seven wagons full of—cotton.

JAKE: Vicarro was pretty well pleased w'en he dropped over

FLORA: Yeah. He was—pretty well—pleased.

JAKE: How did you all get along?

FLORA: We got along jus' fine. Jus' fine an'—dandy.

JAKE: He didn't seem like a such a bad little guy. He takes a sensible attitude.

FLORA (*laughing helplessly*): He—sure—does!

JAKE: I hope you made him comfo'table in the house?

FLORA (*giggling*): I made him a pitcher—of nice cold—lemonade!

JAKE: With a little gin in it, huh? That's how you got pissed. A nice cool drink don't sound bad to me right now. Got any left?

FLORA: Not a bit, Mr. Meighan. We drank it a-a-ll up! (*She flops onto the swing.*)

JAKE: So you didn't have such a tiresome time after all?

FLORA: No. Not tiresome a bit. I had a nice conversation with Mistuh—Vicarro . . .

JAKE: What did you all talk about?

FLORA: Th' good-neighbour policy.

JAKE (*chuckling*): How does he feel about th' good-neighbour policy?

FLORA: Oh—(*She giggles.*)—He thinks it's a—good idea! He says—

JAKE: Huh? (*FLORA laughs weakly.*) Says what?

FLORA: Says—(*She goes off into another spasm of laughter.*)

JAKE: What ever he said must've been a panic!

FLORA: He says—(*controlling her spasm*)—he don't think he'll build him a new cotton gin any more. He's gonna let you do a-a-lll his ginnin'—fo' him!

JAKE: I told you he'd take a sensible attitude.

FLORA: Yeah. 'Tomorrow he plans t' come back—with lots more cotton. Maybe another twenty-seven wagons.

JAKE: Yeah?

FLORA: An' while you're ginnin' it out—he'll have me entertain him with—nice lemonade! (*She has another fit of giggles.*)

JAKE: The more I hear about that lemonade the better I like it. Lemonade highballs, huh? Mr. Thomas Collins?

FLORA: I guess it's—gonna go on fo'—th' rest of th'—summer. . . .

JAKE (*rising and stretching happily*): Well, it'll . . . it'll soon be fall. Cooler nights comin' on.

FLORA: I don't know that that will put a—stop to it—though. . . .

JAKE (*obliviously*): The air feels cooler already. You shouldn't be settin' out here without you' shirt on, honey. A change in the air can give you a mighty bad cold.

FLORA: I couldn't stan' nothin' on me—nex' to my—skin.

JAKE: It ain't the heat that gives you all them hives, it's too much liquor. Grog-blossoms, that's what you got! I'm goin' inside to the toilet. When I come out—(*He opens the screen door and goes in.*)—we'll drive in town an' see what's at th' movies. You go hop in the Chevy! (*FLORA laughs to herself. She slowly opens the huge kid purse and removes a wad of Kleenex. She touches herself tenderly here and there, giggling breathlessly.*)

FLORA (*aloud*): I really oughtr' t' have a white kid purse. It's wadded full of—Kleenex—to make it big—like a baby! Big—in my arms—like a baby!

JAKE (*from inside*): What did you say, Baby?

FLORA (*dragging herself up by the chain of the swing*): I'm not—Baby. Mama! Ma! That's—me. . . . (*Cradling the big white purse in her arms, she advances slowly and tenderly to the edge of the porch. The moon shines full on her smiling and ravaged face. She begins to rock and sway gently, rocking the purse in her arms and crooning.*)

Rock-a-bye Baby—in uh tree-tops!

If a wind blows—a cradle will rock! (*She descends a step.*)

If a bough bends—a baby will fall! (*She descends another step.*)

Down will come Baby—cradle—an'—all! (*She laughs and stares raptly and vacantly up at the moon.*)

CURTAIN

The Purification

A play in verse to be performed with a musical accompaniment on the guitar. The action takes place in the Western ranchlands over a century ago. The characters are Spanish ranchers and Indians.

The place-names used in this play are associated mainly with the country around Taos, New Mexico, but that is merely because those names and that country come most familiarly to my mind. It is the clear, breath-taking sort of country that I like to use as the background for the play. Actually I do not know whether or not people of this type ever lived there and I don't believe it matters.

For MARGO JONES

CHARACTERS

THE JUDGE

An aristocratic rancher of middle age

THE SON

A youth of twenty, handsome, irrationally tense
of feeling

THE MOTHER

Pure blooded Castillian with iron-grey hair; she
is dressed in rich mourning

THE FATHER

Tall and gaunt, a steady wine-drinker: brooding
and slow of movement

THE RANCHER FROM CASA ROJO

The burnt-out shell of a longing that drove to
violence. His blood is coarser than the people
from Casa Blanca. But he is a man of dignity
and force

LUISA

An Indian servant-woman—some Spanish blood.
A savage nature. She wears a good deal of jewellery
and a brilliant shawl

AN INDIAN YOUTH

A CHORUS OF THREE MEN AND THREE WOMEN
Ranchers

THE GUITAR PLAYER

He wears a domino and a scarlet-lined cape—he
sits on a stool beside the wide arched doorway

ELENA OF THE SPRINGS *and* THE DESERT ELENA

Two visions of the same character—the lost girl

The Purification

SCENE: *A bare room, white or pearl grey. A number of plain wooden benches, a small square table for the JUDGE. Skull of a steer on wall. The wide arched door admits a vista of plain and sky: the sky is a delicate aquamarine: the plain pale gold. A range of purplish mountains between. Two high-set windows with sunlight slanting through them. A crime has been committed: an informal trial is being conducted. The CHORUS file silently onto the stage and seat themselves on the benches as the curtain rises. Next comes The Guitar Player. He plays softly as the main characters come in. The JUDGE remains standing back of the table till the others are seated.*

S C E N E I

THE JUDGE:

Well, my neighbours, I know about as much of court-procedure as any reasonably well-informed jack-rabbit.

Nevertheless I seem to be the Judge.

And I was put in office more, I hope,
for what you know about me than what I know.

I do not believe in one man judging another.

I'd rather that those who stand in need of judgment
would judge themselves.

Honour being
more than a word amongst us

I have no doubt
that this is the kind of judgment which will prevail.

We're all of us ranchers—neighbours—

Our enmities, sometimes bloody, are usually brief.

Our friendships—longer lasting.

And that is good. . . . What I mean to say is simply this—

We know each other sufficiently well, I think,

to get along without much ceremony.

An evil thing has occurred.

The reasons are still beclouded.

This much we know: the rains are long delayed.

The season is parched.

Our hearts, like forests stricken by the drought,
are quick to flame.

Well, flames have broken out, not only in the Lobos,
but here, between two ranches.

Rain is needed.

Rain's the treatment for a forest fire.

For violent deeds likewise the rain is needed.

The rain I speak of is the rain of truth,
for truth between men is the only purification.

How is it over the Lobos, Senor Moreno?

RANCHER (*the one nearest the door*): Clouded a little.

JUDGE: Bueno!

(*catching sight of a flask*)

Drinking inside is forbidden—outside is not my business.

So let's get on with what we have come to do.

You neighbours from Casa Blanca——

I ask you first

to speak concerning your daughter——

(*facing the MOTHER*)

You, the mother,

what do you have to say?

(*The MOTHER bows her head.*)

FATHER: She cannot speak.

JUDGE: Can you?

FATHER: Not like a man with any of his senses.

JUDGE:

Then like a man without them, if you will——

But speak up freely——

Speak out the broken language of your hearts
and we'll supply the sense where it seems to be needed.

(*Cbord on guitar*)

FATHER:

It is not easy to tell you
about our daughter.
Her name was Elena.

SON:

She had no name
for no one here could name her.

MOTHER: Her name—was Elena.

SON:

Her skeleton,
much too elastic,
stitched together
the two lost frozen blue poles!

(*A murmur among the CHORUS*)

LUISA: The tainted spring—is bubbling.

FATHER:

He means to say
she went beyond our fences.

SON:

I mean to say
she went beyond all fences.
The meadow grasses
continued entirely too far
beyond where the gate
was broken—in several—places . . .

LUISA (*mockingly*): Listen—bubbling, bubbling!

FATHER: Our son is demented.

MOTHER: Since the death of our daughter.

LUISA: The tainted spring—is bubbling!

(*The CHORUS murmurs. The JUDGE raises his band to warn them.*)

JUDGE: The boy would speak?

MOTHER (*quickly*): He is not able to speak!

JUDGE:

I think he can speak,
but in the language of vision.

THE PURIFICATION

[SC. 1

Rosalio, would you
speak concerning your sister?

SON (*slowly rising*):

Her eyes were always
excessively clear in the morning.
Transparency is a bad omen
in very young girls!
It makes flight

necessary
sometimes!

(*Facing his parents*)

You should have bought her
the long crystal beads that she wanted

MOTHER (*gently, not looking up*):

But how could we know
she would have been satisfied with them?

SON:

Oh, I know, Mother,
you fear that she might have desired
to discover reflections in them
of something much farther away
than those spring freshets she bathed in,
naked, clasping her groin
rigidly, with both palms,
against the cold
immaculate kiss of snow-water!

(*The CHORUS murmur*)

LUISA: The tainted spring—is bubbling!

(*The RANCHER places a restraining hand on LUISA's shoulder*)

FATHER:

He means to say
she went beyond our fences.

SON:

Beyond all fences, Father.
She knew also
glaciers, intensely blue,

valleys, brilliant with sunlight,
 lemon-yellow, terrific!
 And desolation
 that stretched too widely apart
 the white breast-bones of her body!

LUISA: Bubbling—bubbling!

(*The FATHER touches his arm but he continues, facing the door.*)

SON (*violently*):

Not even noon's
 thundering
 statement
 crescendo
 of distance!

Knocking down walls
 with two
 blows
 brutal
 bare fists
 clenched over quicksilver

could ever—(*tenderly*)
 could certainly never—enclose
 such longing as was my sister's!
 How much less night,
 fearlessly stating with stars
 that breathless inflection—

Forever?

(*The wordless singing rises. The wide arched portal that gives on the aquamarine of the desert sky now lightens with a ghostly radiance. Bells toll softly. The guitar weaves a pattern of rapture. Rosalio's sister, ELENA OF THE SPRING, steps into the doorway. She wears a sheer white robe and bears white flowers. With slender candle-like fingers she parts the shawl that covers her head and reveals her face. Her lips are smiling. But only the SON Rosalio is aware of the apparition—he and The Guitar Player. The others stare at the Indian woman, LUISA, who rises stiffly from the bench beside the RANCHER from Casa Rojo.*)

THE PURIFICATION

[SC. 1

LUISA (*clutching her wooden beads*):

You have heard the dead lady compared to mountain water.

A very good comparison, I think.

I once led goats through the mountains:

we stopped to drink.

It seemed the purest of fountains.

Five of the goat herd died.

I only survived because I had promised the master

that I would return

in time for the Feast of the Virgin . . .

The water was crystal—but it was fouled at the source.

The water was—tainted water!

(The girl of the vision lowers her head and covers her face and her garland with the shawl. The guitar plays—sad and sinister.

She turns and withdraws from the doorway.)

SON (*springing furiously at the servant*): *Madre de Dios!*

JUDGE: Restrain him!

(The FATHER holds him back, dramatic chords on the guitar.)

SON: This whore should be made to taste of the bastinado!

MOTHER:

Patience, my son.

The *xopilote* will croak—we cannot prevent it!

JUDGE: You people from Casa Blanca will serve us best in advancing your own satisfaction by holding the peace until this witness has finished.

(To LUISA)

Go on, Señora. But please to avoid uncalled-for offence to these people.

LUISA:

The youth's demented. That's true.

He used to ride on his pony past our place.

He cried out loud to some invisible creatures as even a moment ago you saw his rapturous gaze at an empty doorway.

The moon, I suspect,

has touched his head too fondly.

CHORUS:

The moon, we suspect,
has touched his head too fondly.
(*They nod and mumble.*)

LUISA:

You know how it is in August?
In August the heavens
take on more brilliance, more fire.
They become—unstable.
And then I believe it is well to stay indoors,
to keep yourself at a sensible occupation.
This one lacked prudence, however.
He rode at night, bare-back,
through the Sangre de Cristo,
shouting aloud and making ridiculous gestures.
(*The guitar plays—lyrical chords.*)

You know how it is in August?

CHORUS: Yes, in August!

LUISA:

The stars make—sudden excursions.
The moon's—lopsided.
The dogs go howling like demons about the ranches.

CHORUS: Howling like demons!

LUISA:

I'm wise—I stay indoors.
But this one here, this youth from Casa Blanca,
continually raced and raced
through the mountain larches—
until exhaustion stopped him.
When he stopped—
it was not always in his own enclosures.
(*The CHORUS gossip and nod. The JUDGE warns them.*)

No—

He pastured his pony some nights at Casa Rojo.
His visits were unannounced except by the pony's
neighing in the distance, borne down windward.

THE PURIFICATION

[SC. 1

On one such occasion as this
I climbed upstairs to notify the mistress.
This was unnecessary: her bed was empty:
the covers—thrown aside.

(*Guitar. The CHORUS whisper. The JUDGE silences them.*)

I did not trouble the master, he was sleeping,
but went alone through the meadow:
the grasses were chill: I shivered:
I bore no lantern—the starlight proved sufficient.
I had not come to the barn
when suddenly through the window of the loft,
that was lit with the wavering radiance of a candle—
two naked figures appeared in a kind of—dance . . .

(*Loud dramatic chords on the guitar. Castanets and drums.
Shocked murmur among the women. The CHORUS rise and talk
among themselves.*)

RANCHER: *Basta! Basta, Luisa!*

(*He clenches his hands in torment.*)

LUISA: Someone has got to speak!

MOTHER (*rising*):

So at last it is out—
this infamous slander whispered against our house!

(*Silence.*)

FATHER (*choked*): What man of this woman's people will answer
for it?

LUISA:

I am alone.

I'll answer for it myself.

THE JUDGE:

Resume your seats, *mis vecinos*.

It is foolish to feign surprise at the charge now spoken.

A thing so persistently whispered in our kitchens

is better spoken out in the presence of all.

So now it is necessary to face it squarely.

(*The guitar plays—tragic, tormented. The SON looks down
without moving.*)

LUISA (*smiling*): Why doesn't he stand?

FATHER: Rosalio, stand!—And speak!

MOTHER (*rising*): No!—Wait!

(*She speaks softly, tenderly, and makes delicate gestures with her hands which are ringed with rubies and sapphires.*)

My son is the victim of an innocent rapture.

His ways are derived of me.

I also rode on horseback through the mountains
in August as well as in March—

I also shouted and made ridiculous gestures
before I grew older and learned the uselessness of it . . .

If this imputes some dark guilt on the doer,

Then I, his mother, must share in this public censure.

Sangre mala—call it.

CHORUS (*whispering*): *Sangre mala! Sangre mala!*

MOTHER:

Our people—were Indian-fighters . . .

The Indians now are subdued—

So what can we do but contend with our own queer shadows?

THE JUDGE: Senora—

MOTHER:

Bear with me a while,
for I must explain things to you.

FATHER:

Callate, Maria!

Rosalio, stand and speak!

(*The son looks at the JUDGE.*)

THE JUDGE: Yes, Rosalio, speak.

(*The son rises slowly, twisting the length of white rope between his hands.*)

SON: What do you want me to tell you?

THE JUDGE (*smiling*): Simply the truth.

SON:

The truth?

Why ask me for that?

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[SC. I

Ask it of him, the player—
for truth is sometimes alluded to in music.
But words are too loosely woven to catch it in . . .
A bird can be snared as it rises
or torn to earth by the falcon.
His song, which is truth,
is not to be captured ever.
It is an image, a dream,
it is the link to the mother,
the belly's rope that dropped our bodies from God
a longer time ago than we remember!
I—forget.

(The CHORUS murmur.)

LUISA: The tainted spring—is bubbling.

SON: Player! Prompt me with music.

(The Guitar Player sweeps the strings.)

SON (*with a sudden smile*):

How shall I describe
the effect that a song had on us?
On nights of fiesta
the ranch-boys, eager with May,
surrounded our fences
with little drum-gourds, with guitars.

(Facing the MOTHER)

You, Mother, would wash
the delicate white lace curtains,
sweep down the long stairs
and scent the alcoves with lemon.

(Chord on the guitar.)

How shall I describe
the effect that a song had on us?
Our genitals were too eager!

MOTHER (*involuntarily*): No!

LUISA: Listen!

SON:

Player, prompt me with music

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For I have lost the thread.
Weave back my sister's image.

(*Music*)

No. She's lost,
Snared as she rose,
 or torn to earth by the falcon!
No, she's lost,
Irretrievably lost,
Gone out among Spanish-named ranges
 (*He smiles vaguely.*)
Too far to pursue
 except on the back of that lizard . . .

LUISA: Bubbling! Bubbling!

MOTHER: Rosalio!

(*The FATHER touches her shoulder.*)

SON:

. . . Whose green phosphorescence,
 scimitar-like,
 disturbs midnight
with hissing, metallic sky-prowling

JUDGE:

Is this the chimera you,
 you moon-crazed youth,
 pursued through the mountains?

SON: No . . .

(*LUISA laughs harshly.*)

LUISA:

How shall he describe
the effect that a song had on him!

SON: I washed my body in snow.

LUISA: Because it was shameful!

SON:

Yes!
And now you may know
how well indeed I succeeded
in putting out fires.
My sister is free.

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[SC. 1

(*To the RANCHER*)

His hand gave liberty to her.

But mine—a less generous agent——

Only gave her—longings . . .

(*The MOTHER cries out. The FATHER rises. The CHORUS murmur.*)

LUISA: *Sangre mala!*

(*A peal of thunder outside.*)

JUDGE:

A house that breeds in itself
will breed destruction.

LUISA: *Sangre mala!*

FATHER (*passionately*):

In our blood
was the force that carved this country!
Sangre mala, you call it?

THE JUDGE:

Your pride turned inward too far,
excluded the world and lost itself in a mirror.

MOTHER:

No, we admitted too much of the world, I think.

We should have put up more fences.

The Conquistadors must not neglect their fences.

FATHER: Ours were neglected.

MOTHER: We poured our blood in the desert to make it flower

FATHER: The flowers were not good flowers.

(*The sky through the doorway darkens. Wind moans.*)

MOTHER: They were neglected.

SON (*tormented*): Mother!

MOTHER: I never should have poured—dark wine—at supper.

SON: Mother!

MOTHER:

Yes—yes, lately the place
has grown a great deal wilder
because of neglect

or maybe because
winds take more liberty with it.
Storms seem to come more often.

FATHER:

Year after year it's the same.
I step out the door, a little bit drunk after supper,
to watch down the valley——
Five miles off, even ten,
the rainstorms advancing
like armies of tall, silent men.
Nothing changes . . .

MOTHER:

But isn't it strange
how things grow up in a life?
Like trees——
One spring planted—accepted—forgotten almost,
'Then all of a sudden—crowding the backyard with shadows!

FATHER:

Invaders!
We are invaders ourselves.
These ranches, these golden valleys——
A land so fiercely contested as this land was
Father's blood and mother's anguish bought it'
Is it to be merely used for cattle to graze on?
Are we to build on it nothing but barns and fences?
No, no, we are invaders. We used the land—gave nothing!
But even so——
This man has killed our daughter.
We ask in return his life.

MOTHER: Demand his life in return.

LUISA: Hear how the blood-lust in them cries out loud!

THE JUDGE:

Rosalio, in your presence your sister was slain.
It is for you to accuse the man who . . .

SON (*springing up*): Yes, I accuse him!

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LUISA:

'Your tongue should be torn from your mouth and flung to buzzards!

Shameless—Shameless!

SON:

Yes, I am shameless—shameless.

The kitchen-woman has spoken her kitchen truth.

The loft of the barn was occupied by lovers
not once, not twice, but time and time again,
whenever our blood's rebellion broke down bars.

Resistless it was,

this coming of birds together

in heaven's centre . . .

Plumage—song—the dizzy spirals of flight
all suddenly forced together

in one brief, burning conjunction!

Oh—oh—

a passionate little spasm of wings and throats
that clutched—and uttered—darkness . . .

Down

down

down

Afterwards, shattered,
we found our bodies in grass.

(*Soft music*)

The coolness healed us,

the evening drained our fever,
bandaged the wounded part in silk of stars . . .

And so did the wind take back the startling pony—
and hurl him down arroyos towards the dawn!

(*He sinks down on the bench between his parents.*)

THE JUDGE (*rising*):

Enough for a while—enough. The court is thirsty.

(*He crosses to door and shouts.*)

Muchachos! Run to the well and bring us water!

Or if you prefer—*babatero!*

Musician—play!

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(Smiling cavalierly, The Guitar Player moves sinuously forward. He stands in the light through the window and plays a danson. Gourds and buckets of water are brought inside and passed among the benches.)

(The JUDGE returns from the doorway.)

SCENE II

THE JUDGE:

The clouds are darkening still.
If heaven is good enough to send us rain
the court will be suspended until tomorrow.
Now let us get on.

(He pauses before the people from Casa Blanca.)

Rosalio, could you not guess
that this violation of blood which you have acknowledged
would certainly—sooner or later—
bring shame—disaster?

SON:

We knew—and we did not know.
We were oblivious of this sun-bleached man
who sullenly dreamed to possess her.
But he of us derived his green suspicion,
the only green thing in him,
watered and tended by this sly Indian woman.
He, our former repair man,
mender of our broken fences,
which almost without our knowledge had grown to be his
till he seized on the girl—instead of Casa Blanca.
Finding that all of his clutching was finally gainless,
clutched an axe!
For he would be owner of something—or else destroy it!

(The guitar sounds. He faces the RANCHER.)

You, repair man, come early,
before daybreak can betray you.

Now clasp in your hand
the smooth white hilt of the axe!
But wait! Wait—first—
Fill up the tin buckets
with chalky white fluid, the milk
of that phosphorescent green lizard—
Memory, passion.

LUISA: The tainted spring . . .

SON:

Unsatisfied old appetites—
And stir these together—
carefully, not to slop over—

LUISA: . . . is bubbling!

SON (*to* LUISA):

You, too,
assist in this business.
Bring a scapular blade
to remove the stained parts of the lumber—
Collection of rags
to scrub the splatterings off.

MOTIER (*moaning*). Ahhh—ahhh

SON (*deliriously*):

For often toward daybreak that rime
of the reptile's diamond-like progress .

LUISA (*mockingly*): He wanders again. The tainted spring is
bubbling!

SON:

. . . makes following easy
for those who desire to pursue him.
He depends on his tail's rapid motion,
scimitar-like—green lightning—
to stave off hunters!
You have to skip rope lightly, handy-man,
our former repair man,
you have to skip rope lightly—lightly!—lightly!
Carry your axe and your bucket

slow-clanking past frozen hen-houses
 where sinister stalactite fowls make rigid comment
 claw—beak—
 barely, perceptibly stirring their russet feathers—
 on purpose of your quiet passage.
 Go on—go on to where
 the barn,
 that moon-paled building,
 large
 and church-like in arch of timber,
 tumescent between the sensual fingers of vines,
 intractably waits
 this side of your death-coition!
 There halt, repair man,
 for surely the light will halt you if nothing else does.

(Guitar)

RANCHER (*trance-like*):

It stood
 in a deep well of light.

It stood like a huge wrecked vessel—in deep seas of light!

SON: You halted . . .

CHORUS (*like an echo*): Halt!

RANCHER: Yes.

SON: At this immemorial vault,

CHORUS: Vault!

SON:

this place of plateaux
 and ranges of Spanish-named mountains . .

CHORUS: Mountains!

RANCHER:

Yes.

I set up the ladder.

SON:

Set up the steep, steep ladder—
 Narrow . . .

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RANCHER:

Narrow!—Enquiring
If Christ be still on the Cross!

CHORUS: Cross!

SON: Against the north wall set it . . .

RANCHER:

Set it and climbed . . .
(*He clutches his forehead.*) Climbed!

CHORUS: Climbed

SON:

Climbed!
To the side of the loft
that gave all things to the sky.
The axe—
for a single moment—
saluted the moon—then struck!

CHORUS: Struck!

SON: And she didn't cry . . .

RANCHER:

Struck?
Aye, struck—struck—*struck!*

CHORUS: Struck!

*(Dissonant chords on the guitar, with cymbals. The two men
surge together and struggle like animals till they are torn apart.
There is a rumble of thunder.)*

THE JUDGE:

Thunder?—Over the Lobos.
Señores,
Your passion is out of season.
This is the time for reflection to calm the brain,
as later, I hope, the rain will cool our ranches.
I know that truth
evades the certain statement
but gradually and obliquely filters through
the mind's unfettering in sleep and dream.
The stammered cry gives more of truth than the hand

could put on passionless paper . . .

My neighbour from Casa Rojo,

Stand and speak your part in this dark recital.

You say that the woman Elena

never allowed you freely the right of marriage?

RANCHER:

Never freely, and never otherwise.

It was no marriage.

They have compared her to water—and water, indeed, she was.
Water that ran through my fingers when I was athirst.

Oh, from the time that I worked at Casa Blanca,

a labourer for her people, as they have mentioned,

I knew there was something obscure—subterranean—

cool—from which she drew her persistence,

when by all rights

of what I felt to be nature,

she should have dried—as fields in a rainless summer,

a summer like this one that presently starves our grain-fields,

she should have dried, this seemingly loveless woman,

and yet she *didn't*.

Yes, she was cool, she was water,

even as they have described her—

but water sealed under the rock—where I was concerned.

I burned.

I burned.

I burned . . .

(Three dissonant notes are sounded on the guitar. There is a feverish, incessant rustling sound like wind in a heap of dead leaves.)

RANCHER (*boarsely*):

I finally said to her once,

in the late afternoon it was, and she stood in the doorway . . .

(The dissonant notes are repeated. The rustling is louder. A sound of mocking laughter outside the door, sudden and brief.)

The DESERT ELENA appears. It is the same lost girl, but not as the brother had seen her. This is the vision of the loveless bride,

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the water sealed under rock from the lover's thirst—not the green of the mountains and the clear swift streams, but the sun-parched desert. Her figure is closely sheathed in a coarse-fibred bleached material, her hair bound tight to her skull. She bears a vessel in either hand, like balanced scales, one containing a cactus, the other a wooden grave-cross with a wreath of dry, artificial flowers on it. Only the RANCHER observes her.)

RANCHER:

'Woman,' I said to her, 'Woman, what keeps you alive?'

'What keeps you sparkling so, you make-believe fountain?'

(To the vision)

'You and the desert,' I told her,

'You are sisters—sisters beneath the skin!'

But even the desert is, sometimes pregnant with something,
distorted progeny,

twisted, dry, imbecilic,

gives birth to the cacti,

the waterless Judas tree.

The blood of the root makes liquor to scorch the brain and
put foul oaths on the tongue.

But you—you, woman, bear nothing,

nothing ever but death—which is all you will get

with your pitiful—stone kind of body.

ELENA: Oh, no—I will get something more.

THE JUDGE:

More? You will get something more?

Where will it come from—lovely, smiling lady?

(The dead leaves rustle.)

Will it come singing and shouting and plunging bare-back
down canyons

and run like wild birds home to Sangre de Cristo

when August crazes the sky?

ELENA (*smiling*): Yes!

RANCHER (*to the JUDGE*):

Yes, she admitted, yes!

For in their house, these people from Casa Blanca—no one can say they fear to speak the truth!

ELENA:

Perhaps it will come as you say—but until then
The fences are broken—mend them.
The moon is needing a new coat of white-wash on it!
Attend to that, repair man! Those are your duties.
But keep your hands off me!

RANCHER: My hands are empty—starved!

ELENA: Fill them with chicken-feathers! Or buzzard-feathers.

RANCHER: My lips are dry.

ELENA:

Then drink from the cistern Or if the cistern is empty,
moisten your lips with the hungry blood of the fox that kills
our fowls.

RANCHER: The fox-blood burns!

ELENA:

Mine, too.

I have no coolness for you.

my hands are made of the stuff in the dried sulphur pools.

These are my gifts:

the cactus, the bleached grave-cross with the wreath of dead
vines on it.

Listen! The wind, when it blows,

is rattling dry castanets in the restless grave-yard.

The old monks whittle—they make prayer-beads in the cellar.

Their fingers are getting too stiff to continue the work.

They dread the bells. For the bells are heavy and iron
and have no wetness in them.

The bones of the dead have cracked from lack of moisture.

The sisters come out in a quick and steady file and their black
skirts whisper dryer and dryer and dryer,
until they halt

before their desperate march has reached the river.

The river has turned underground.

The sisters crumble: beneath their black skirts crumble,

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the skirts are blown and the granular salty bodies
go whispering off among the lifeless grasses . . .

I must go too,

For I, like these, have glanced at a burning city.

Now let me go!

(She turns austere and moves away from the door. Three dissonant notes on the guitar and the sound of dead rustling leaves is repeated. A yellow flash of lightning in the portal, now vacant, and the sound of wind.)

RANCHER:

My hand shot out, whip-like, to catch at her wrist,

But she had gone . . .

My wife—that make-believe fountain—had fled from the door.

(He covers his face with his hands.)

THE JUDGE (*rising*):

Player, give us the music
of wind that promises rain.

The time is dry.

But clouds have come,
and the sound of thunder is welcome.

Now let the Indian women tread the earth
in the dance that destroys the locust!

(The three white-robed women rise from their bench and move in front. They perform a slow, angular dance to drums and guitar. Their movements slow. The music softens. The dance and the music become a reticent background for the speech.)

RANCHER:

Elena had fled through the door as the storm broke on us.
She had fled through the open door, out over the fields
darkening down the valley

where rain was advancing
its tall silent squadrons of silver.

Her figure was lost
in a sudden convulsion of shadows
heaved by the eucalyptus.

(The dancers raise their arms.)

The rain came down
as sound of rapturous trumpets rolled over the earth,
and still
the delicate warmthless yellow
of late afternoon persisted
behind
that transparent curtain of silver.
At once the clouds
had changed their weight into motion,
their inkiness thinned,
their cumulous forms rose higher,
their edges were stirred
as radiant feathers, upwards, above the mountains.

*(Distant choral singing. Wordless. "La Golondrina" is woven
into the music.)*

RANCHER:

A treble choir
now sang in the eucalyptus,
an Angelus rang !

(Bells)

The whole wide vault of the valley,
the sweep of the plain
assumed a curious lightness under the rain.
The birds already, the swallows,
before the rainstorm ceased,
had begun to climb
the atmosphere's clean spirals.
Ethereal wine
intoxicated these tipplers,
their notes were wild
and prodigal as fool's silver.
The moon,
unshining, blank, bone-like,
stood over the Lobos mountains
and grinned and grinned
like a speechless idiot where

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the cloud-mass thinned . . .
I saw her once more—briefly,
running along by the fence at the end of the meadow. .
The long and tremendous
song of the eucalyptus described this flight:
the shoulders inclined stiffly forward,
the arms flung out, throat arched,
more as though drunk
with a kind of heroic abandon—than blinded—by fright.
(*He covers his face.*)

Forgive me . . .

(*The cloud that darkened the sun passes over. The stream of
fierce sunlight returns through the door and the windows. The
women return to the bench.*)

SCENE III

• (*The JUDGE pours water from a gourd to wet his handkerchief and
wipes his forehead.*)

THE JUDGE:

The clouds have cheated again—and crossed away.
Our friend the sun comes back like an enemy now.
We want the rain—the coolness—the shade . . .
It is not given us yet.

THE WOMEN (*softly chanting*):

Rojo—rojo

Rojo de sangre es el sol.

THE JUDGE:

It is the lack of what he desires most keenly
that twists a man out of nature.
When you were a boy, my friend from Casa Rojo,
you were gentle—withdrew too much from the world,
This reticence, almost noble, persisted through youth,
but later, as you grew older,
an emptiness, still unfilled, became a cellar,

a cellar into which blackness dripped and trickled,
a slow, corrosive seepage.

Then the reticence
was no longer noble—but locked—resentful,
and breeding a need for destruction.

What was clear?

RANCHER: Nothing was clear.

THE JUDGE: What was straight?

RANCHER: Nothing was straight.

THE JUDGE: How did the light come through?

RANCHER: Through the crookedest entrance, the narrowest area-way!

THE JUDGE: And where you walked—what was it you walked among?

RANCHER: A pile of my own dead bones—like discarded lumber.

THE JUDGE: The day was still.

RANCHER: Oppressively still.

THE JUDGE:

Noon—breathless. The sky was vacant.

White—plague-like—exhausted.

RANCHER:

Once it disgorged
a turbulent swarm of locusts.
Heat made wave-like motions
over the terrible
desert statement of distance.
Giants came down,
invisibly,
pounding huge—huge—drums!

THE WOMEN (*softly*):

Rojo—rojo

Rojo de sangre es el sol!

(*A low drumming*).

RANCHER:

Drummers!

Drummers!

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Go back under my skull.
'There is a time for nightmare's reality later!
Ahhh—ahhh—with disgust.
With fur on the tongue,
with mucous-inflamed eyeballs,
fever enlarging the horrible chamber at night!

THE WOMEN:

Rojo—rojo
Rojo de sangre es el sol!

RANCHER:

Now do you wonder
that with no divining rod excepting my thirst
I looked for coolness of springs
in the woman's body?
That finding none,
or finding it being cut off—drained away
at the source—by the least suspected,
I struck?
And *struck*?
And tore the false rock open?

THE WOMEN: *Rojo—rojo.*

RANCHER:

I own my guilt,
I own it before you ranchers, before you women.
I say that I struck with an axe
at the wife's false body
and would have struck him, too,
but my strength went from me.
I found the two together
and clove them apart
with that—the axe.
No more,
there is no more.

THE WOMEN:

Rojo de sangre es el sol!

Rojo—rojo.

Rojo de sangre es el sol!

(The RANCHER sinks to the bench. The SON rises. A cloud again passes over the sky. There is a glimmer of lightning and the fretful murmur of wind. A dimness replaces the glare that was in the room. The women murmur and draw their shawls about them.)

SON (*facing the RANCHER*):

You shall not defame her,
nor shall you defile her,
this quicksilver girl,
this skyward diver,
this searcher after pearls,
terrestrial striver!
Blue—

Blue

Immortally blue
is space at last . . .
I think she always knew
that she would be lost in it.
Lost in it? Where!
In which if any direction!
Player, with music lead us!
Lead us—Where?

(The Guitar Player, with an assenting smile, rises by the door.)

SON (*with gestures of infinite longing*):

O stallion lover
the night is your raped white mare!
The meadow grasses continued entirely too far
beyond where the gate—is broken in several places.
Cling to it, dark child,
till it carries you further than ever.
O make it swing out
to the wildest and openest places!
The most—indestructible places!
For nothing contains you now,

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no, nothing contains you,
lost little girl, my sister,
not even those—little—blue veins
that carried the light to your temples,
O springtime jets
so torrential they burst their vessels
and spattered the sky!

*(Bells toll softly once more and the girl reappears in the doorway.
It is the first vision again—ELENA OF THE SPRINGS. The SON
stumbles toward her.)*

SON: Elena.

(She shakes her head with a sorrowful smile.)

Elena!

(He whips a knife from his belt and holds it above him.)

Witness—in this thrust—our purification!

*(He plunges the knife into his breast. Everyone rises with a soft
intake of breath. The Guitar Player stands and sweeps back his
crimson cape. He accompanies the speech and action with delicate
chords.)*

MOTHER (*unbearably*): My son!

SON: Elena . . .

*(The vision retreats smiling, transcendent. The SON drops the
knife and leaps in the open doorway. The sky darkens and there
is a rumble of thunder. A voice in the distance cries "Rain!")*

SON (*looking out with a smile*):

Peeto, our pony,
catches the scent in his nostrils
of thunderstorms coming . . .

(A delicate chord on the guitar.)

When Peeto was born
he stood on his four legs at once, and accepted the world.
He was wiser than I.
When Peeto was one year old,
he was wiser than God!

A VOICE (*hearer*): The rain! The rain! The rain!

SON (*with a faint smile, glancing up*):

Peeto! Peeto!

The Indian boys call after . . .

VOICE (*still nearer*): The rain!

SON:

. . . trying to stop him,

trying to stop—the wind . . .

(*He lurches forward and falls to the floor. An Indian Youth in a wet blue shirt and sombrero bursts in the doorway, shouting.*)

YOUTH: The rain! The rain! The . . .

(*He tears off his sombrero and flings the rain from the brim across the court-room. Then he suddenly observes the body on the floor. He falls respectfully silent and bows his head. Outside is heard the faint and haunting music of guitars, accompanied by the wordless singing of women. Rain can be heard falling steadily and gently on the roof.*)

MOTHER (*quietly, rising from her knees, facing the RANCHER*): Pass him the knife.

RANCHER:

I thank you, Senora.

This generous offer, however, is unrequired.

(*He removes from his belt a silver knife.*)

I also came prepared for— purification.

(*He turns to the Indian*)

What did you say?—The rain?

As one who has suffered over-long from drought

I'd like the cooling taste of rain on my lips.

(*He bows.*)

Señoras—Señores . . .

Follow me if you will—I go outside.

(*He moves to the door.*)

LUISA: Stop him!

(*She faces the CHORUS pleadingly but all are motionless. With a sob, she tries to rush outside with the RANCHER. Indians at*

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[SC. III]

either side of the door clutch her arms and hold her pinioned in the archway. She writhe between them. The Guitar Player strikes a sombre chord.)

THE JUDGE:

It needs no witness.

(He crosses in front of the table.)

Here on this plain,
between these mountain ranges,
we seem to have bred
some feeling of honour amongst us,
deeper than law.

That is good.

It is good that we keep it bright against the time
when lesser breeds than we,
invaders!—honourless thieves and killers without any conscience,
come—as they someday will
to try that honour.

If men keep honour, the rest can be arranged.

The rest will arrange itself—in the course of time.

(Outside an alarum of trumpets. LUISA screams. The Guitar Player tosses his bat in the middle of the floor.)

THE JUDGE *(turning and bowing to the audience)*: *Mañana es otro día.*

The play is done!

(The Guitar Player sweeps his strings as the curtain falls slowly.)

CURTAIN

The Lady of Larkspur Lotion

C H A R A C T E R S

MRS.^a HARDWICKE-MOORE

MRS. WIRL

THE WRITER

Larkspur Lotion is a common treatment for body vermin.

The Lady of Larkspur Lotion

SCENE: *A wretchedly furnished room in the French Quarter of New Orleans. There are no windows, the room being a cubicle partitioned off from several others by imitation walls. A small slanting skylight admits the late and unencouraging day. There is a tall, black armoire, whose doors contain cracked mirrors, a swinging electric bulb, a black and graceless dresser, an awful picture of a Roman Saint and over the bed a coat-of-arms in a frame.*

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE, *a dyed-blond woman of forty, is seated passively on the edge of the bed as though she could think of nothing better to do.*

There is a rap at the door.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*in a sharp, affected tone*): Who is at the door, please?

MRS. WIRE (*from outside, bluntly*): Me! (*Her face expressing a momentary panic, MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE rises stiffly.*)

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Oh. . . Mrs. Wire. Come in. (*The landlady enters, a heavy, slovenly woman of fifty.*) I was just going to drop in your room to speak to you about something.

MRS. WIRE: Yeah? What about?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*humorously, but rather painfully smiling*): Mrs. Wire, I'm sorry to say that I just don't consider these cockroaches to be the most desirable kind of room-mates—do you?

MRS. WIRE: Cockroaches, huh?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Yes. Precisely. Now I have had very little experience with cockroaches in my life, but the few that I've seen before have been the pedestrian kind, the kind that *walk*. These, Mrs. Wire, appear to be *flying* cockroaches! I was shocked, in fact I was literally stunned, when one of them took off the floor and started to whiz through the air, around and around in a circle, just missing my face by barely a couple of inches. Mrs. Wire, I sat down on the edge of this bed and *wept*, I was just so shocked and disgusted! Imagine! Flying cockroaches, something I never

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dreamed to be in existence, whizzing around and around and around in front of my face! Why, Mrs. Wire, I want you to know——

MRS. WIRE (*interrupting*): Flying cockroaches are nothing to be surprised at. They have them all over, even uptown they have them. But that ain't what I wanted to——

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*interrupting*): That may be true, Mrs. Wire, but I may as well tell you that I have a horror of roaches, even the plain old-fashioned, pedestrian kind, and as for this type that flies——! If I'm going to stay on here these flying cockroaches have got to be gotten rid of and gotten rid of at *once*!

MRS. WIRE: Now how'm I going to stop them flying cockroaches from coming in through the windows? But that, however, is not what I——

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*interrupting*): I don't know *how*, Mrs. Wire, but there certainly must be a method. All I know is they must be gotten rid of before I will sleep here one more night, Mrs. Wire. Why, if I woke up in the night and found one on my bed, I'd have a convulsion, I swear to goodness I'd simply *die* of convulsions!

MRS. WIRE: If you'll excuse me for sayin' so, Mrs. Hardshell-Moore, you're much more likely to die from over-drinkin' than cockroach convulsions! (*She seizes a bottle from the dresser.*) What's this here? Larkspur Lotion! *Well!*

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*flushing*): I use it to take the old polish off my nails.

MRS. WIRE: Very fastidious, yes!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: What do you mean?

MRS. WIRE: There ain't an old house in the Quarter that don't have roaches.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: But not in such enormous quantities, do they? I tell you this place is actually crawling with them!

MRS. WIRE: It ain't as bad as all that. And by the way, you ain't yet paid me the rest of this week's rent. I don't want to get you off the subject of roaches, but, nevertheless, I want to collect that money.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: I'll pay you the rest of the rent as soon as you've exterminated these roaches!

MRS. WIRE: You'll have to pay me the rent right away or get out.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: I intend to get out unless these roaches get out!

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MRS. WIRE: Then get out then and quit just talking about it!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: You must be out of your mind, I can't get out right now!

MRS. WIRE: Then what did you mean about roaches?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: I meant what I said about roaches, they are not, in my opinion, the most desirable room-mates!

MRS. WIRE: Okay! Don't room with them! Pack your stuff and move where they don't have roaches!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: You mean that you *insist* upon having the roaches?

MRS. WIRE: No, I mean I insist upon having the rent you owe me.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Right at the moment that is out of the question.

MRS. WIRE: Out of the question, is it?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Yes, and I'll tell you why! The quarterly payments I receive from the man who is taking care of the rubber plantation have not been forwarded yet. I've been expecting them to come in for several weeks now but in the letter that I received this morning it seems there has been some little misunderstanding about the last year's taxes and——

MRS. WIRE: Oh, now stop it, I've heard enough of that goddam rubber plantation! The Brazilian rubber plantation! You think I've been in this business seventeen years without learning nothing about your kind of women?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*stiffly*): What is the implication in that remark?

MRS. WIRE: I suppose the men that you have in here nights come in to discuss the Brazilian rubber plantation?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: You must be crazy to say such a thing as that!

MRS. WIRE: I hear what I hear an' I know what's going on!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: I know you spy, I know you listen at doors!

MRS. WIRE: I never spy and I never listen at doors! The first thing a landlady in the French Quarter learns is not to *see* and not to *bear* but only collect your *money*! As long as that comes in—

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okay, I'm blind, I'm deaf, I'm dumb! But soon as it stops, I recover my hearing and also my sight and also the use of my voice! If necessary I go to the phone and call up the chief of police who happens to be an in-law of my sister's! I heard last night that argument over money.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: What argument? What money?

MRS. WIRE: He shouted so loud I had to shut the front window to keep the noise from carrying out on the streets! I heard no mention of any Brazilian plantation! But plenty of other things were plainly referred to in that little midnight conversation you had! Larkspur Lotion—to take the polish off nails! Am I in my infancy, am I? That's on a par with the wonderful rubber plantation! (*The door is thrown open. The WRITER, wearing an ancient purple bathrobe, enters.*)

WRITER: Stop!

MRS. WIRE: *Ob!* It's you!

WRITER: Stop persecuting this woman!

MRS. WIRE: The second Mr. Shakespeare enters the scene!

WRITER: I heard your demon howling in my sleep!

MRS. WIRE: *Sleep?* Ho-ho! I think that what you mean is your drunken stupor!

WRITER: I rest because of my illness! Have I no right——

MRS. WIRE (*interrupting*): Illness—*alcoholic!* Don't try to pull that beautiful wool over my eyes. I'm glad you come in now. Now I repeat for your benefit what I just said to this woman. I'm done with *dead beats!* Now is that plain to yuh? Completely fed-up with all you Quarter rats, half-breeds, drunkards, degenerates, who try to get by on promises, lies, delusions!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*covering her ears*): *Oh, please, please, please stop shrieking!* It's not necessary!

MRS. WIRE (*turning on MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE*): You with your Brazilian rubber plantation. That coat-of-arms on the wall that you got from the junk-shop—the woman who sold it told me! One of the Hapsburgs! Yes! A titled lady! *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion!* There's your title! (*MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE cries out wildly and flings herself face down on the sagging bed.*)

WRITER (*with a pitying gesture*): Stop badgering this unfortunate

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little woman! Is there no mercy left in the world anymore? What has become of compassion and understanding? Where have they all gone to? Where's God? Where's Christ? (*He leans trembling against the armoire.*) What if there is no Brazilian rubber plantation?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*sitting passionately erect*): I tell you there is, there is! (*Her throat is taut with conviction, her head thrown back.*)

WRITER: What if there is no rubber king in her life! There ought to be rubber kings in her life! Is she to be blamed because it is necessary for her to compensate for the cruel deficiencies of reality by the exercise of a little—what shall I say?—God-given—imagination?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*throwing herself face down on the bed once more*): No, no, no, no, it isn't—imagination!

MRS. WIRE: I'll ask you to please stop spitting me in the face those high-flown speeches! You with your 780-page masterpiece—right on a par with the Lady of Larkspur Lotion as far as the use of imagination's concerned!

WRITER (*in a tired voice*): Ah, well, now, what if I am! Suppose there is no 780-page masterpiece in existence (*He closes his eyes and touches his forehead.*) Supposing there is in existence no masterpiece whatsoever! What of that, Mrs. Wire? But only a few, a very few—vain scribblings—in my old trunk-bottom. . . . Suppose I wanted to be a great artist but lacked the force and the power! Suppose my books fell short of the final chapter, even my verses languished uncompleted! Suppose the curtains of my exalted fancy rose on magnificent dramas—but the house-lights darkened before the curtain fell! Suppose all of these unfortunate things are true! And suppose that I—stumbling from bar to bar, from drink to drink, till I sprawl at last on the lice-infested mattress of this brothel—suppose that I, to make this nightmare bearable for as long as I must continue to be the helpless protagonist of it—suppose that I ornament, illuminate—glorify it! With dreams and fictions and fancies! Such as the existence of a 780-page masterpiece—impending Broadway productions—marvellous volumes of verse in the hands of publishers only waiting for signatures to release them! Suppose that I live in this world of pitiful fiction! What satisfaction can it give you, good woman, to tear it to pieces,

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to crush it—call it a *lie*? I tell you this—now listen! There are no lies but the lies that are stuffed in the mouth by the hard-knuckled hand of need, the cold iron fist of necessity, Mrs. Wire! *So I am a liar, yes! But your world is built on a lie, your world is a hideous fabrication of lies! Lies! Lies! . . . Now I'm tired and I've said my say and I have no money to give you so get away and leave this woman in peace! Leave her alone. Go on, get out, get away! (*He shoves her firmly out the door.*)

MRS. WIRE (*shouting from the other side*): Tomorrow morning! Money or out you go! Both of you. Both together! 780-page masterpiece and Brazilian rubber plantation! *BALONEY!* (*Slowly the derelict WRITER and the derelict woman turn to face each other. The daylight is waning greyly through the skylight. The WRITER slowly and stiffly extends his arms in a gesture of helplessness.*)

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*turning to avoid his look*): Roaches! Everywhere! Walls, ceiling, floor! The place is infested with them.

WRITER (*gently*): I know. I suppose there weren't any roaches on the Brazilian rubber plantation.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*warming*). No, of course there weren't. Everything was immaculate always—always *Immaculate!* The floors were so bright and clean they used to shine like—mirrors!

WRITER: I know. And the windows—I suppose they commanded a very lovely view!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE. Indescribably lovely!

WRITER: How far was it from the Mediterranean?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*dimly*): The Mediterranean? Only a mile or two!

WRITER: On a very clear morning I daresay it was possible to distinguish the white chalk cliffs of Dover? . . . Across the channel?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Yes—in very clear weather it *was*. (*The WRITER silently passes her a pint bottle of whisky.*) Thank you, Mr.—?

WRITER: Chekhov! Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE (*smiling with the remnants of coquetry*): Thank you, Mr.—Chekhov.

CURTAIN

The Last of My Solid Gold Watches

This play is inscribed to Mr. Sidney Greenstreet, for whom the principal character was hopefully conceived.

Ce ne peut être que la fin du monde, en avançant.

RIMBAUD.

C H A R A C T E R S

MR. CHARLIE COLTON

A NEGRO

A porter in the hotel

HARPER

A travelling salesman

The Last of My Solid Gold Watches

SCENE: *A hotel room in a Mississippi Delta town. The room has looked the same, with some deterioration, for thirty or forty years. The walls are mustard-coloured. There are two windows with dull green blinds, torn slightly, a ceiling-fan, a white iron bed with a pink counterpane, a washstand with rose-buds painted on the pitcher and bowl, and on the wall a coloured lithograph of blindfolded Hope with her broken lyre.*

The door opens and MR. CHARLIE COLTON comes in. He is a legendary character, seventy-eight years old but still "going strong." He is lavish of flesh, superbly massive and with a kingly dignity of bearing. Once he moved with a tidal ease and power. Now he puffs and rumbles; when no one is looking he clasps his hand to his chest and cocks his head to the warning heart inside him. His huge expanse of chest and bell, criss-crossed by multiple gold chains with various little fobs and trinkets suspended from them. On the back of his head is a derby and in his mouth a cigar. This is "Mistuh Charlie"—who sadly but proudly refers to himself as "the last of the Delta drummers." He is followed into the room by a NEGRO porter, as old as he is—thin and toothless and grizzled. He totes the long orange leather sample cases containing the shoes which MR. CHARLIE is selling. He sets them down at the foot of the bed as MR. CHARLIE fishes in his pocket for a quarter.

MR. CHARLIE (*banding the coin to the NEGRO*): Hyunh!

NEGRO (*breathlessly*): Thankyseh!

MR. CHARLIE: Huh! You're too old a darkey to tote them big heavy cases.

NEGRO (*grinning sadly*): Don't say that, Mistuh Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE: I reckon you'll keep right at it until yuh drop some day.

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NEGRO: That's right, Mistuh Charlie. (MR. CHARLIE fishes in his pocket for another quarter and tosses it to the NEGRO, who crouches and cackles as he receives it.)

MR. CHARLIE: Hyunh!

NEGRO: Thankyseh, thankyseh!

MR. CHARLIE: Now set that fan in motion an' bring me in some ice-water by an' by!

NEGRO: De fan don' work, Mistuh Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE: Huh! Deterioration! Everything's going down-hill around here lately!

NEGRO: Yes, suh, dat's de troof, Mistuh Charlie, ev'ything's goin' down-hill.

MR. CHARLIE: Who all's registered here of my acquaintance? Any ole-timers in town? a

NEGRO: Naw, suh, Mistuh Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE: "Naw-suh-Mistuh-Charlie" 's all I get any more! You mean to say I won't be able to scare up a poker-game?

NEGRO (*chuckling sadly*): Mistuh Charlie, you's de bes' judge about dat!

MR. CHARLIE: Well, it's mighty slim pickin's these days. Ev'ry time I come in a town there's less of the old and more of the new, and by God, nigguh, this new stand of cotton I see around the Delta's not worth pickin' off th' ground! Go down there an' tell that young fellow, Mr. Bob Harper, to drop up here for a drink!

NEGRO (*withdrawing*): Yes, suh.

MR. CHARLIE: It looks like otherwise I'd be playin' solitaire!

(*The NEGRO closes the door. MR. CHARLIE crosses to the window and raises the blind. The evening is turning faintly blue. He sighs and opens his valise to remove a quart of whisky and some decks of cards which he slaps down on the table. He pauses and clasps his hand over his chest.*)

MR. CHARLIE (*ominously to himself*): Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom! Here comes th' parade! (*After some moments there comes a rap at the door.*) Come awn in! (HARPER, a salesman of thirty-five,

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enters. He has never known the "great days of the road" and there is no vestige of grandeur in his manner. He is lean and sallow and has a book of coloured comics stuffed in his coat pocket.)

HARPER: How is the ole war-horse?

MR. CHARLIE (*heartily*): Mighty fine an' dandy! How's the young squirrel?

HARPER: Okay.

MR. CHARLIE: That's the right answer! Step on in an' pour you'self a drink! Cigar?

HARPER (*accepting both*): Thanks, Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE (*staring at his back with distaste*): Why do you carry them comic sheets around with yuh?

HARPER: Gives me a couple of laughs ev'ry once and a while.

MR. CHARLIE: Poverty of imagination! (*HARPER laughs a little resentfully.*) You can't tell me there's any real amusement in them things. (*He pulls it out of HARPER's coat pocket.*) "Superman," "The Adventures of Tom Tyler!" Huh! None of it's half as fantastic as life itself! When you arrive at my age—which is seventy-eight— you have a perspective of time on earth that astounds you! Literally astounds you! Naw, you say it's not true, all of that couldn't have happened! And for what *reason*? Naw! You begin to wonder. . . . Well . . . You're with Schultz and Werner?

HARPER: That's right, Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE: That concern's comparatively a new one.

HARPER: I don't know about that. They been in th' bus'ness fo' goin' on twenty-five years now, Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE: Infancy! Infancy! You heard this one, Bob? A child in its infancy don't have half as much fun as adults—in their adultery! (*He roars with laughter. HARPER grins. MR. CHARLIE falls silent abruptly. He would have appreciated a more profound response. He remembers the time when a joke of his would precipitate a tornado. He fills up HARPER's glass with whisky.*)

HARPER: Ain't you drinkin'?

MR. CHARLIE: Naw, suh. Quit!

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HARPER: How come?

MR. CHARLIE: Stomach! Perforated!

HARPER: Ulcers? (MR. CHARLIE *grunts*. *He bends with difficulty and heaves a sample case onto the bed.*) I had ulcers once.

MR. CHARLIE: *Ev'ry* drinkin' man has ulcers once. Some *twice*.

HARPER: You've fallen off some, ain't you?

MR. CHARLIE (*opening the sample case*): Twenty-seven pounds I lost since August. (HARPER *whistles*. MR. CHARLIE *is fishing among his samples.*) Yay-ep! Twenty-seven pounds I lost since August. (*He pulls out an oxford which he regards disdainfully.*) Hmmm . . . A waste of cow-hide! (*He throws it back in and continues fishing.*) A man of my age an' constitution, Bob—he oughtn't to carry so much of that—adipose tissue! It's—— (*He straightens up, red in the face and puffing.*) —a terrible strain on the heart! Hand me that other sample—over yonder. I wan' t' show you a little eyeful of qucenly footwear in our new spring line! Some people say that the Cosmopolitan's not abreast of the times! That is an allegation which I deny and which I intend to disprove by the simple display of one little calf-skin slipper! (*opening up the second case*). Here we are, son! (*fishing among the samples*). You knew ole "Marblehead" Langner in Friar's Point, Mississippi.

HARPER: Ole "Marblehead" Langner? Sure.

MR. CHARLIE: They found him dead in his bath-tub a week ago Satiddy night. *Here's* what I'm lookin' faw!

HARPER: "Marblehead"? Dead?

MR. CHARLIE: *Buried!* Had a Masonic funeral. I helped carry th' casket. Bob, I want you t' look at this Cuban-heel, shawl-tongue, perforated toe, calf-skin Misses' sport-oxford! (*He elevates it worshipfully.*) I want you to look at this shoe—and tell me what you think of it in plain language! (HARPER *whistles and bugs his eyes.*) Ain't that a piece of *real* merchandise, you squirrel? Well, suh, I want you t' know——!

HARPER: Charlie, that certainly is a piece of merchandise there!

MR. CHARLIE: Bob, that piece of merchandise is only a small indication—of what our spring line consists of! You don't have

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to pick up a piece of merchandise like that—with I.S.C. branded on it!—and examine it with the microscope t' find out if it's quality stuff as well as quality *looks*! This ain't a shoe that Mrs. Jones of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, is going to throw back in your face a couple or three weeks later because it comes to pieces like *card-board* in th' first *rain*! No, suh—I want you to know! We got some pretty fast-movers in our spring line—I'm layin' my samples out down there in th' lobby first thing in th' mornin'—I'll pack 'em up an' be gone out of town by *noon*— But by the Almighty Jehovah I bet you I'll have to *wire* the office to mail me a bunch of *brand-new* order-books at my next stopping-off place, Bob! *Hot cakes! That's* what I'm sellin'! (*He returns exhaustedly to the sample case and tosses the shoe back in, somewhat disheartened by HARPER's vaguely benevolent contemplation of the brass light-fixture. He remembers a time when people's attention could be more securely riveted by talk. He slams the case shut and glances irritably at HARPER who is staring very sadly at the brown carpet.*) Well, suh— (*He pours a shot of whisky.*) It was a mighty shocking piece of news I received this afternoon.

HARPER (*blowing a smoke ring*): What piece of news was that?

MR. CHARLIE: The news about ole Gus Hanna—one of the old war-horses from way back, Bob. He and me an' this boy's daddy, C. C., used t' play poker ev'ry time we hit town together in this here self-same room! Well, suh, I want you t' know—

HARPER (*screwing up his forehead*): I think I heard about that. Didn't he have a stroke or something a few months ago?

MR. CHARLIE: He *did*. An' partly *recovered*.

HARPER: Yeah? Last I heard he had t' be fed with a spoon.

MR. CHARLIE (*quickly*): He did an' he partly recovered! He's been goin' round, y'know, in one of them chairs with a 'lectric motor on it. Goes chug-chug-chuggin' along th' road with th' butt of a cigar in his mouth. Well, suh, yestuddy in Blue Mountain, as I go out the Elks' Club door I pass him comin' in, bein' helped by th' nigguh—"Hello! Hiyuh, Gus!" That was at six-fifteen. Just half an hour later Carter Bowman stepped inside the hotel lobby where I was packin' up my sample cases an' give me the

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information that ole Gus Hamma had just now burnt himself to death in the Elks' Club lounge!

HARPER (*involuntarily grinning*): What uh yuh talkin' about?

MR. CHARLIE: Yes, suh, the ole war-horse had fallen asleep with that nickel cigar in his mouth—set his clothes on fire—and burnt himself right up like a piece of paper!

HARPER: I don't believe yuh!

MR. CHARLIE: Now, why on earth would I be lyin' to yuh about a thing like that? He burnt himself right up like a piece of paper!

HARPER: Well, ain't that a bitch of a way for a man to go?

MR. CHARLIE: *One way—another way——!* (*gravely*). Maybe you don't *know* it—but all of us ole-timers, Bob, are disappearin' *fast!* We all gotta quit th' road one time or another. Me, I reckon I'm pretty nearly the last of th' Delta drummers!

HARPER (*restively squirming and glancing at his watch*): The last—of th' Delta drummers! How long you been on th' road?

MR. CHARLIE: Fawty-six yeahs in Mahch!

HARPER: I don't believe yuh.

MR. CHARLIE: Why would I tell you a lie about something like that? No, suh, I want you t' know—I want you t' know—Hmmm. . . . I lost a mighty good customer this week.

HARPER (*with total disinterest, adjusting the crotch of his trousers*): How's that, Charlie?

MR. CHARLIE (*grimly*): Ole Ben Summers—Friar's Point, Mississippi . . . Fell over dead like a bolt of lightning had struck him just as he went to pour himself a drink at the Cotton Planters' Cotillion!

HARPER: Ain't that terrible, though! What was the trouble?

MR. CHARLIE: Mortality, that was the trouble! Some people think that millions now living are never going to *die*. I don't think that—I think it's a misapprehension not borne out by the facts! We go like flies when we come to the end of the summer . . . And who is going to prevent it? (*He becomes depressed.*) Who—is going—to prevent it! (*He nods gravely.*) The road is changed. The shoe

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industry is changed. These times are—revolution! (*He rises and moves to the window.*) I don't like the way that it looks. You can take it from me—the world that I used to know—the world that this boy's father used t' know—the world we belonged to, us old time war-horses!—is slipping and sliding away from under our shoes. Who is going to prevent it? The ALL LEATHER slogan don't sell shoes any more. The stuff that a shoe's made of is not what's going to sell it any more! No! STYLE! SMARTNESS! APPEARANCE! That's what counts with the modern shoe-purchaser, Bob! But try an' tell your style department that. Why, I remember the time when all I had to do was lay out my samples down there in the lobby. Open up my order-book an' write out orders until my fingers *ached*! A sales-talk was not *necessary*. A store was a place where people sold merchandise, and to sell merchandise the retail-dealer had to obtain it from the wholesale manufacturer, Bob! Where they get merchandise now I do not pretend to know. But it don't look like they buy it from wholesale dealers! Out of the air—I guess it materializes! Or maybe stores don't *sell* stuff any more! Maybe I'm living in a world of illusion! I recognize that possibility, too!

HARPER (*casually, removing the comic paper from his pocket*). Yep—yep. You must have witnessed some changes.

MR. CHARLIE: Changes? A mild expression. Young man—I have witnessed—a REVOLUTION! (*HARPER has opened his comic paper but MR. CHARLIE doesn't notice, for now his peroration is really addressed to himself*) Yes, a *revolution*! The atmosphere that I breathe is not the same! Ah, well—I'm an old war-horse. (*He opens his coat and lifts the multiple golden chains from his vest. An amazing number of watches rise into view. Softly, proudly he speaks.*) Looky here, young fellow! You ever seen a man with this many watches? How did I *acquire* this many time-pieces? (*HARPER has seen them before. He glances above the comic sheet with affected amazement.*) At every one of the annual sales conventions of the Cosmopolitan Shoe Company in St. Louis a seventeen-jewel, solid-gold, Swiss-movement Hamilton watch is presented to the ranking salesman of the year! Fifteen of those watches have been awarded to me!

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I think that represents something! I think that's *something* in the way of achievement! . . . Don't you?"

HARPER: Yes, *sirree!* You bet I do, Mistuh Charlie! (*He chuckles at a remark in the comic sheet. MR. CHARLIE sticks out his lips with a grunt of disgust and snatches the comic sheet from the young man's hands.*)

MR. CHARLIE: Young man—I'm talkin' to *you*, I'm talkin' for your *benefit*. And I expect the courtesy of your attention until I am through! I may be an old war-horse. I may have received—the last of my solid gold watches . . . But just the same—good manners are still a part of the road's tradition. And part of the *South's* tradition. Only a young peckerwood would look at the comics when old Charlie Colton is talking.

HARPER (*taking another drink*): Excuse me, Charlie. I got a lot on my mind. I got some business to attend to directly.

MR. CHARLIE: And directly you shall attend to it! I just want you to know what I think of this new world of yours! I'm not one of those that go howling about a Communist being stuck in the White House now! I don't say that Washington's been took over by Reds! I don't say all of the wealth of the country is in the hands of the Jews! I like the Jews and I'm a friend to the niggers! I *do* say *this*—however. . . . The world I knew is gone—gone—gone with the wind! My pockets are full of watches which tell me that my time's just about over! (*A look of great trouble and bewilderment appears on his massive face. The rather noble tone of his speech slackens into a senile complaint.*) All of them—pigs that was slaughtered—carcasses dumped in the river! Farmers receivin' payment *not t'* grow wheat an' corn an' *not t'* plant cotton! All of these alphabet letters that's sprung up all about me! Meaning—unknown—to men of my generation! The rudeness—the lack of respect—the newspapers full of strange items! The terrible—fast—dark—rush of events in the world! Toward what and where and why! . . . I don't pretend to have any knowledge of now! I only say—and I say this very humbly—I don't understand—what's happened. . . . I'm one of them monsters you see reproduced in museums—out of the dark old ages—the giant *rep*-tiles, and the dino-whatever-you-call-ems. BUT—I *do* know *this*! And I state it without any shame! Initiative—

THE LAST OF MY SOLID GOLD WATCHES

self-reliance—independence of character! The old sterling qualities that distinguished one man from another—the clay from the potters—the potters from the clay—are— (*kneading the air with his hands*). How is it the old song goes? . . . Gone with the roses of yesterday! Yes—with the wind!

HARPER (*whose boredom has increased by leaps and bounds*): You old-timers make one mistake. You only read one side of the vital statistics.

MR. CHARLIE (*stung*): What do you mean by that?

HARPER: In the papers they print people *dead* in one corner and people *born* in the next and usually *one* just about levels *off* with the *other*.

MR. CHARLIE: Thank you for that information. I happen to be the godfather of several new infants in various points on the road. However, I think you have missed the whole point of what I was saying.

HARPER: I don't think so, Mr. Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE: Oh, yes, you have, young fellow. My point is this: the ALL-LEATHER slogan is not what sells any more—not in shoes and not in humanity, neither! The emphasis isn't on quality. Production, production, yes! But out of inferior goods! *Ersatz*—that's what they're making 'em out of!

HARPER (*getting up*): That's your opinion because you belong to the past.

MR. CHARLIE (*furiously*): A piece of impertinence, young man! I expect to be accorded a certain amount of respect by whipper-snappers like you!

HARPER: Hold on, Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE: I belong to—tradition. I am a *legend*. Known from one end of the Delta to the other. From the Peabody hotel in Memphis to Cat-Fish Row in Vicksburg. Mistuh Charlie—*Mistuh Charlie*! Who knows you? What do *you* represent? A line of goods of doubtful value, some kike concern in the East! Get out of my room! I'd rather play solitaire, than poker with men who're no more solid characters than the jacks in the deck! (*He*

THE LAST OF MY SOLID GOLD WATCHES

opens the door for the young salesman who shrugs and steps out with alacrity. Then he slams the door shut and breathes heavily. The NEGRO enters with a pitcher of ice water.)

NEGRO (*grinning*): What you shoutin' about, Mistah Charlie?

MR. CHARLIE: I lose my patience sometimes. Nigger——

NEGRO: Yes, suh?

MR. CHARLIE: You remember the way it used to be.

NEGRO (*gently*): Yes, suh.

MR. CHARLIE: I used to come in town like a conquering hero! Why, my God, nigger—they all but laid red carpets at my feet! Isn't that so?

NEGRO: That's so, Mistuh Charlie.

MR. CHARLIE: This room was like a *throne-room*. My samples laid out over there on green velvet cloth! The ceiling-fan *going*—now *broken*! And over here—the wash-bowl an' pitcher removed and the table-top *loaded* with *liquor*! In and out from the time I arrived till the time I left, the men of the road who knew me, to whom I stood for things commanding respect! Poker—continuous! Shouting, laughing—hilarity! Where have they all gone to?

NEGRO (*solemnly nodding*): The graveyard is crowded with folks we knew, Mistuh Charlie. It's mighty late in the day!

MR. CHARLIE: Huh! (*He crosses to the window.*) Niggguh, it ain't even late in the day any more—— (*He throws up the blind.*) It's NIGHT! (*The space of the window is black.*)

NEGRO (*softly, with a wise old smile*): Yes, suh . . . *Night*, Mistuh Charlie!

CURTAIN

Portrait of a Madonna

*Respectfully dedicated to the talent
and charm of Miss Lillian Gish*

C H A R A C T E R S

MISS LUCRETIA COLLINS

THE PORTER

THE ELEVATOR BOY

THE DOCTOR

THE NURSE

MR. ABRAMS

•

Portrait of a Madonna

SCENE: *The living-room of a moderate-priced city apartment. The furnishings are old-fashioned and everything is in a state of neglect and disorder. There is a door in the back wall to a bedroom, and on the right to the outside hall.*

MISS COLLINS: Richard! (*The door bursts open and MISS COLLINS rushes out, distractedly. She is a middle-aged spinster, very slight and bunched of figure with a desiccated face that is flushed with excitement. Her hair is arranged in curls that would become a young girl and she wears a frilly negligee which might have come from an old hope chest of a period considerably earlier.*) No, no, no, no! I don't care if the whole church hears about it! (*She frenziedly snatches up the phone.*) Manager, I've got to speak to the manager! Hurry, oh, please hurry, there's a man——! (*Wildly aside as if to an invisible figure.*) Lost all respect, absolutely no respect! Mr. Abrams? (*In a tense husky voice.*) I don't want any reporters to hear about this but something awful has been going on upstairs. Yes, this is Miss Collins' apartment on the top floor. I've refrained from making any complaint because of my connections with the church. I used to be assistant to the Sunday School superintendent and I once had the primary class. I helped them put on the Christmas pageant. I made the dress for the Virgin and Mother, made robes for the Wise Men. Yes, and now this has happened, I'm not responsible for it, but night after night after night this man has been coming into my apartment and—indulging his senses! Do you understand? Not once but repeatedly, Mr. Abrams! I don't know whether he comes in the door or the window or up the fire-escape or whether there's some secret entrance they know about at the church, but he's here now, in my bedroom, and I can't force him to leave, I'll have to have some assistance! No, he isn't a thief, Mr. Abrams, he comes of a very fine family in Webb, Mississippi,

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but this woman has ruined his character, she's destroyed his respect for ladies! Mr. Abrams? Mr. Abrams! Oh, goodness! (*She slams up the receiver and looks distractedly about for a moment; then rushes back into the bedroom.*) Richard! (*The door slams shut. After a few moments an old PORTER enters in drab grey cover-alls. He looks about with a sorrowfully humorous curiosity, then timidly calls.*)

PORTER. Miss Collins? (*The elevator door slams open in ball and the ELEVATOR BOY, wearing a uniform, comes in.*)

ELEVATOR BOY: Where is she?

*PORTER: Gone in 'er bedroom.

ELEVATOR BOY (*grinning*): She got him in there with her?

PORTER: Sounds like it. (*MISS COLLINS' voice can be heard faintly protesting with the mysterious intruder.*)

ELEVATOR BOY: What'd Abrams tell yuh to do?

PORTER: Stay here an' keep a watch on 'er till they git here.

ELEVATOR BOY: Jesus.

PORTER: Close 'at door.

ELEVATOR BOY: I gotta leave it open a little so I can hear the buzzer. Ain't this place a holy sight though?

PORTER: Don't look like it's had a good cleaning in fifteen or twenty years. I bet it ain't either. Abrams'll bust a blood-vessel when he takes a lookit them walls.

ELEVATOR BOY: How comes it's in this condition?

PORTER: She wouldn't let no one in.

ELEVATOR BOY: Not even the paper-hangers?

PORTER: Naw. Not even the plumbers. The plaster washed down in the bathroom underneath hers an' she admitted her plumbin' had been stopped up. Mr. Abrams had to let the plumber in with this here pass-key when she went out for a while.

ELEVATOR BOY: Holy Jeez. I wunner if she's got money stashed around here. A lotta freaks do stick away big sums of money in ole mattresses an' things.

PORTER: She ain't. She got a monthly pension cheque or something she always turned over to Mr. Abrams to dole it out to 'er. She

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told him that Southern ladies was never brought up to manage financial affairs. Lately the cheques quit comin'.

ELEVATOR BOY: Yeah?

PORTER: The pension give out or somethin'. Abrams says he got a contribution from the church to keep 'er on here without 'er knowin' about it. She's proud as a peacock's tail in spite of 'er awful appearance.

ELEVATOR BOY: Lissen to 'er in there!

PORTER: What's she sayin'?

ELEVATOR BOY: Apologizin' to him! For callin' the *police*!

PORTER: She thinks police 're comin'?

MISS COLLINS (*from bedroom*): Stop it, it's got to stop!

ELEVATOR BOY: Fightin' to protect her honour again! What a commotion, no wunner folks are complainin'!

PORTER (*lighting his pipe*): This here'll be the last time.

ELEVATOR BOY: She's goin' out, huh?

PORTER (*blowing out the match*): Tonight.

ELEVATOR BOY: Where'll she go?

PORTER (*slowly moving to the old gramophone*): She'll go to the state asylum.

ELEVATOR BOY: Holy G!

PORTER: Remember this ole number? (*He puts on a record of "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles."*)

ELEVATOR BOY: Naw. When did that come out?

PORTER: Before your time, sonny boy. Machine needs oilin'. (*He takes out small oil-can and applies oil about the crank and other parts of gramophone.*)

ELEVATOR BOY: How long is the old girl been here?

PORTER: Abrams says she's been livin' here twenty-five, thirty years, since before he got to be manager even.

ELEVATOR BOY: Livin' alone all that time?

PORTER: She had an old mother died of an operation about fifteen years ago. Since then she ain't gone out of the place excep' on

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Sundays to church or Friday nights to some kind of religious meeting.

ELEVATOR BOY: Got an awful lot of ol' magazines piled aroun' here.

PORTER: She used to collect 'em. She'd go out in back and fish 'em out of the incinerator.

ELEVATOR BOY: What'n hell for?

PORTER: Mr. Abrams says she used to cut out the Campbell soup kids. Them red-tomato-headed kewpie dolls that go with the soup advertisements. You seen 'em, ain'tcha?

ELEVATOR BOY: Uh-huh.

PORTER: She made a collection of 'em. Filled a big lot of scrap-books with them paper kiddies an' took 'em down to the Children's Hospitals on Xmas Eve an' Easter Sunday, exactly twicet a year. Sounds better, don't it? (*referring to gramophone, which resumes its faint, wbeedling music*) Eliminated some a that crankin' noise . . .

ELEVATOR BOY: I didn't know that she'd been nuts *that* long.

PORTER: Who's nuts an' who ain't? If you ask me the world is populated with people that's just as peculiar as she is.

ELEVATOR BOY: Hell. She don't have brain *one*.

PORTER: There's important people in Europe got less'n she's got. Tonight they're takin' her off 'n' lockin' her up. They'd do a lot better to leave 'er go an' lock up some a them maniacs over there. She's harmless; they ain't. They kill millions of people an' go scot free!

ELEVATOR BOY: An ole woman like her is disgusting, though, imaginin' somebody's raped her.

PORTER: Pitiful, not disgusting. Watch out for them cigarette ashes.

ELEVATOR BOY: What's uh diff'rence? So much dust you can't see it. All a this here goes out in the morning, don't it?

PORTER: Uh-huh.

ELEVATOR BOY: I think I'll take a couple a those ole records as curiosities for my girl friend. She's got a portable in 'er bedroom, she says it's better with music!

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PORTER: Leave 'em alone. She's still got 'er property rights.

ELEVATOR BOY: Aw, she's got all she wants with them dream-lovers of hers!

PORTER: *Hush up!* (He makes a warning gesture as MISS COLLINS enters from bedroom. Her appearance is that of a ravaged woman. She leans exhaustedly in the doorway, hands clasped over her flat, virginal bosom.)

MISS COLLINS (breathlessly): Oh, Richard—Richard . . .

PORTER (coughing): Miss—Collins.

ELEVATOR BOY: Hello, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS (just noticing the men): Goodness! You've arrived already! Mother didn't tell me you were here! (Self-consciously she touches her ridiculous corkscrew curls with the faded pink ribbon tied through them. Her manner becomes that of a slightly coquettish but prim little Southern belle.) I must ask you gentlemen to excuse the terrible disorder.

PORTER: That's all right, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: It's the maid's day off. Your No'thern girls receive such excellent domestic training, but in the South it was never considered essential for a girl to have anything but prettiness and charm! (She laughs girlishly.) Please do sit down. Is it too close? Would you like a window open?

PORTER: No, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS (advancing with delicate grace to the sofa): Mother will bring in something cool after awhile. . . . Oh, my! (She touches her forehead.)

PORTER (kindly): Is anything wrong, Miss Collins?

MISS COLLINS: Oh, no, no, thank you, nothing! My head is a little bit heavy. I'm always a little bit—malarial—this time of year! (She sways dizzily as she starts to sink down on the sofa.)

PORTER (helping her): Careful there, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS (vaguely): Yes, it is, I hadn't noticed before. (She peers at them near-sightedly with a besitant smile.) You gentlemen have come from the church?

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PORTER: No, ma'am. I'm Nick, the porter, Miss Collins, and this boy here is Frank that runs the elevator.

MISS COLLINS (*stiffening a little*): Oh? . . . I don't understand.

PORTER (*gently*): Mr. Abrams just asked me to drop in here and see if you was getting along all right.

MISS COLLINS: Oh! Then he must have informed you of what's been going on in here!

PORTER: He mentioned some kind of—disturbance.

MISS COLLINS: Yes! Isn't it outrageous? But it mustn't go any further, you understand. I mean you mustn't repeat it to other people.

PORTER: No, I wouldn't say nothing.

MISS COLLINS: Not a word of it, please!

ELEVATOR BOY: Is the man still here, Miss Collins?

MISS COLLINS: Oh, no. No, he's gone now.

ELEVATOR BOY: How did he go, out the bedroom window, Miss Collins?

MISS COLLINS (*vaguely*): Yes. . . .

ELEVATOR BOY: I seen a guy that could do that once. He crawled straight up the side of the building. They called him The Human Fly! Gosh, that's a wonderful publicity angle, Miss Collins—"Beautiful Young Society Lady Raped by The Human Fly!"

PORTER (*nudging him sharply*): Git back in your cracker box!

MISS COLLINS: Publicity? No! It would be so humiliating! Mr. Abrams surely hasn't reported it to the papers!

PORTER: No, ma'am. Don't listen to this smarty pants.

MISS COLLINS (*touching her curls*): Will pictures be taken, you think! There's one of him on the mantel.

ELEVATOR BOY (*going to the mantel*): This one here, Miss Collins?

MISS COLLINS: Yes. Of the Sunday School faculty picnic. I had the little kindergarteners that year and he had the older boys. We rode in a cab of a railroad locomotive from Webb to Crystal Springs. (*She covers her ears with a girlish grimace and tosses her curls.*) Oh, how the steam-whistle blew! Blew! (*giggling*) *Blewwwww!* It frightened me so, he put his arm round my

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shoulders! But she was there, too, though she had no business being. She grabbed his hat and stuck it on the back of her head and they—they *rassled* for it, they actually *rassled* together! Everyone said it was *shameless*! Don't you think that it was?

PORTER: Yes, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: That's the picture, the one in the silver frame up there on the mantel. We cooled the watermelon in the springs and afterwards played games. She hid somewhere and he took ages to find her. It got to be dark and he hadn't found her yet and everyone whispered and giggled about it and finally they came back together—her hangin' on to his arm like a common little strumpet—and Daisy Belle Huston shrieked out, "Look, everybody, the seat of Evelyn's skirt!" It was—covered with—grass-stains! Did you ever hear of anything as outrageous? It didn't faze her, though, she laughed like it, was something very, very amusing! Rather *triumphant* she was!

ELEVATOR BOY: Which one is him, Miss Collins?

MISS COLLINS: The tall one in the blue shirt holding onto one of my curls. He loved to play with them.

ELEVATOR BOY: Quite a Romeo—1910 model, huh?

MISS COLLINS (*vaguely*): Do you? It's nothing, really, but I like the lace on the collar. I said to Mother, "Even if I don't wear it, Mother, it will be so nice for my hope-chest!"

ELEVATOR BOY: How was he dressed tonight when he climbed into your balcony, Miss Collins?

MISS COLLINS: Pardon?

ELEVATOR BOY: Did he still wear that nifty little stick-candy-striped blue shirt with the celluloid collar?

MISS COLLINS: He hasn't changed.

ELEVATOR BOY: Oughta be easy to pick him up in that. What colour pants did he wear?

MISS COLLINS (*vaguely*): I don't remember.

ELEVATOR BOY: Maybe he didn't wear any. Shimmied out of 'em on the way up the wall! You could get him on grounds of indecent exposure, Miss Collins!

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PORTER (*grasping his arm*): Cut that or git back in your cage! Understand?

ELEVATOR BOY (*snickering*): Take it easy. She don't hear a thing.

PORTER: Well, you keep a decent tongue or get to hell out. Miss Collins here is a lady. You understand that?

ELEVATOR BOY: Okay. She's Shoiley Temple.

PORTER: She's a *lady*!

ELEVATOR BOY: Yeah! (*He returns to the gramophone and looks through the records.*)

MISS COLLINS: I really shouldn't have created this disturbance. When the officers come I'll have to explain that to them. But you can understand my feelings, can't you?

PORTER: Sure, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: When men take advantage of common white-trash women who smoke in public there is probably some excuse for it, but when it occurs to a lady who is single and always com-*pletely* above reproach in her moral behaviour, there's really nothing to do but call for police protection! Unless of course the girl is fortunate enough to have a father and brothers who can take care of the matter privately without any scandal.

PORTER: Sure. That's right, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: Of course it's bound to cause a great deal of very disagreeable talk. Especially 'round the *church*! Are you gentlemen Episcopalian?

PORTER: No, ma'am. Catholic, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: Oh. Well, I suppose you know in England we're known as the English Catholic church. We have direct Apostolic succession through St. Paul who christened the Early Angles—which is what the original English people were called—and established the English branch of the Catholic church over there. So when you hear ignorant people claim that our church was founded by—by Henry the *Eighth*—that horrible, *lecherous* old man who had so many wives—as many as *Blue-beard* they say!—you can see how ridiculous it is and how thoroughly *obnoxious* to anybody who really *knows* and *understands* Church History!

PORTRAIT OF A MADONNA

PORTER (*comfortingly*): Sure, Miss Collins. Everybody knows that.

MISS COLLINS: I wish they *did*, but they need to be *instructed*! Before he died, my father was Rector at the Church of St. Michael and St. George at Glorious Hill, Mississippi. . . . I've literally grown up right in the very *shadow* of the Episcopal church. At Pass Christian and Natchez, Biloxi, Gulfport, Port Gibson, Columbus and Glorious Hill! (*with gentle, bewildered sadness*). But you know I sometimes suspect that there has been some kind of spiritual schism in the modern church. These northern dioceses have completely departed from the good old church traditions. For instance our Rector at the Church of the Holy Communion has never darkened my door. It's a fashionable church and he's terribly busy, but even so you'd think he might have time to make a stranger in the congregation feel at home. But he doesn't though! Nobody seems to have the time any more. . . . (*She grows more excited as her mind sinks back into illusion.*) I ought not to mention this, but do you know they actually take a malicious *de-light* over there at the Holy Communion—where I've recently transferred my letter—in what's been going on here at night in this apartment? *Yes!* (*She laughs wildly and throws up her hands.*) They take a malicious *deLIGHT* in it! (*She catches her breath and gropes vaguely about for a wrapper.*)

PORTER: You lookin' for somethin', Miss Collins?

MISS COLLINS: My—handkerchief . . . (*She is blinking her eyes against tears.*)

PORTER (*removing a rag from his pocket*): Here. Use this, Miss Collins. It's just a rag but it's clean, except along that edge where I wiped off the phonograph handle.

MISS COLLINS: Thanks. You gentlemen are very kind. Mother will bring in something cool after while. . . .

ELEVATOR BOY (*placing a record on machine*): 'This one is got some kind of foreign title. (*The record begins to play Tschalkowsky's "None But the Lonely Heart."*)

MISS COLLINS (*stuffing the rag daintily in her bosom*): Excuse me, please. Is the weather nice outside?

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PORTER (*buskily*): Yes, it's nice, Miss Collins,

MISS COLLINS (*dreamily*): So wa'm for this time of year. I wore my little astrakhan cape to service but had to *carry* it *home*, as the weight of it actually seemed *oppressive* to me. (*Her eyes fall shut.*) The sidewalks seem so dreadfully long in summer. . . .

ELEVATOR BOY: This ain't summer, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS (*dreamily*): I used to think I'd never get to the end of that last block. And that's the block where all the trees went down in the big tornado. The walk is simply *glit-tering* with sunlight. (*Pressing her eyelids.*) Impossible to shade your face and I *do* perspire so freely! (*She touches her forehead daintily with the rag.*) Not a branch, not a leaf to give you a little protection! You simply *have* to *en-dure* it. Turn your hideous red face away from all the front-porches and 'walk as fast as you decently *can* till you get *by* them! Oh, dear, dear Saviour, sometimes you're not so lucky and you *meet* people and have to *smile*! You can't *avoid* them unless you cut *across* and that's so *ob-vi-ous*, you know. . . . People would say you're *peculiar*. . . . His house is right in the middle of that awful leafless block, *their* house, his and *hers*, and they have an automobile and always get home early and sit on the porch and *watch* me walking by—Oh, Father in Heaven—with a malicious *delight*! (*She averts her face in remembered torture.*) She has such *penetrating* eyes, they look straight through me. She sees that terrible choking thing in my throat and the pain I have in *here*—(*touching her chest*)—and she points it out and laughs and whispers to him, "There she goes with her shiny big red nose, the poor old maid—that *loves* you!" (*She chokes and hides her face in the rag.*)

PORTER: Maybe you better forget all that, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: Never, never forget it! Never, never! I left my parasol once—the one with long white fringe that belonged to Mother—I left it behind in the cloak-room at the church so I didn't have anything to cover my face with when I walked by, and I couldn't turn back either, with all those people behind me—giggling back of me, poking fun at my clothes! Oh, dear, dear! I had to walk straight forward—past the last elm tree and into

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• that *merciless* sunlight. Oh! It beat down on me, *scorching* me! *Whips!* . . . Oh, Jesus! . . . Over my face and my body! . . . I tried to walk on fast but was dizzy and they kept closer behind me——! I stumbled, I nearly fell, and all of them burst out laughing! My face turned so *horribly* red, it got so red and wet, I knew how ugly it was in all that merciless glare—not a single shadow to hide it! And then—(*Her face contorts with fear*)—their automobile drove up in front of their house, right where I had to pass by it, and *she* stepped out, in white, so fresh and easy, her stomach round with a baby, the first of the *six*. Oh, God! . . . And he stood smiling behind her, white and easy and cool, and they stood there waiting for me. *Waiting!* I had to keep on. What else could I do? I couldn't turn *back*, could I? *No!* I said dear God, strike me *dead!* He didn't, though. I put my head way down like I couldn't see them! You know what she did? She stretched out her hand to *stop* me! And *he*—he stepped up straight in front of me, *smiling*, blocking the walk with his terrible big white body! "*Lucretia,*" he said, "*Lucretia Collins!*" I—I tried to speak but I couldn't, the breath went out of my body! I covered my face and—ran! . . . Ran! . . . *Ran!* (*beating the arm of the sofa*) till I reached the end of the block—and the elm trees— *started* again. . . . Oh, Merciful Christ in Heaven, how *kind* they were! (*She leans back exhaustedly, her hand relaxed on sofa. She pauses and the music ends.*) I said to Mother, "Mother, we've got to leave town!" We *did* after that. And now after all these years he's finally remembered and come *back!* Moved away from that house and the woman and come *here*—I saw him in the back of the church one day. I wasn't sure—but it *was*. The night after that was the night that he first broke in—and indulged his senses with me. . . . He doesn't realize that I've changed, that I can't feel again the way that I used to feel, now that he's got six children by that Cincinnati girl—three in high-school already! Six! Think of that! Six children! I don't know what he'll say when he knows another one's coming! He'll probably blame *me* for it because a man always *does!* In spite of the fact that he *forced* me!

ELEVATOR BOY (*grinning*): Did you say—a *baby*, Miss Collins?

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MISS COLLINS (*lowering her eyes but speaking with tenderness and pride*): Yes—I'm expecting a child.

ELEVATOR BOY: Jeez! (*He claps his hand over his mouth and turns away quickly.*)

MISS COLLINS: Even if it's not legitimate, I think it has a perfect right to its father's name—don't you?

PORTER: Yes. Sure, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: A child is innocent and pure. No matter how it's conceived. And it must *not* be made to suffer! So I intend to dispose of the little property Cousin Ethel left me and give the child a private education where it won't come under the evil influence of the Christian church! I want to make sure that it doesn't grow up in the shadow of the cross and then have to walk along blocks that scorch you with terrible sunlight! (*The elevator buzzer sounds from the hall.*)

PORTER: Frank! Somebody wants to come up. (*The ELEVATOR BOY goes out. The elevator door hangs shut. The PORTER clears his throat.*) Yes, it'd be better—to go off some place else.

MISS COLLINS: If only I had the courage—but I don't. I've grown so used to it here, and people outside—it's always so *hard* to face them!

PORTER: Maybe you won't—have to face nobody, Miss Collins. (*The elevator door clangs open.*)

MISS COLLINS (*rising fearfully*): Is someone coming—here?

PORTER: You just take it easy, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: If that's the officers coming for Richard, tell them to go away. I've decided not to prosecute Mr. Martin.

(*MR. ABRAMS enters with the DOCTOR and the NURSE. The ELEVATOR BOY gawks from the doorway. The DOCTOR is the weary, professional type, the NURSE hard and efficient. MR. ABRAMS is a small, kindly person, sincerely troubled by the situation.*)

MISS COLLINS (*shrinking back, her voice faltering*): I've decided not to—prosecute Mr. Martin . . .

DOCTOR: Miss Collins?

PORTRAIT OF A MADONNA

MR. ABRAMS (*with attempted heartiness*): Yes, this is the lady you wanted to meet, Dr. White.

DOCTOR: Himm. (*Briskly to the NURSE.*) Go in her bedroom and get a few things together.

NURSE: Yes, sir. (*She goes quickly across to the bedroom.*)

MISS COLLINS (*fearfully shrinking*): Things?

DOCTOR: Yes, Miss Tyler will help you pack up an overnight bag. (*Smiling mechanically.*) A strange place always seems more home-like the first few days when we have a few of our little personal articles around us.

MISS COLLINS: A strange—place?

DOCTOR (*carelessly, making a memorandum*): Don't be disturbed, Miss Collins.

MISS COLLINS: I know! (*Excitedly.*) You've come from the Holy Communion to place me under arrest! On moral charges!

MR. ABRAMS: Oh, no, Miss Collins, you got the wrong idea. This is a doctor who—

DOCTOR (*impatiently*): Now, now, you're just going away for a while till things get straightened out. (*He glances at his watch.*) Two-twenty-five! Miss Tyler?

NURSE: Coming!

MISS COLLINS (*with slow and sad comprehension*): Oh. . . . I'm going away. . . .

MR. ABRAMS: She was always a lady, Doctor, such a perfect lady.

DOCTOR: Yes. No doubt.

MR. ABRAMS: It seems too bad!

MISS COLLINS: Let me—write him a note. A pencil? Please?

MR. ABRAMS: Here, Miss Collins. (*She takes the pencil and crouches over the table. The NURSE comes out with a hard, forced smile, carrying a suitcase.*)

DOCTOR: Ready, Miss Tyler?

NURSE: All ready, Dr. White. (*She goes up to MISS COLLINS.*) Come along, dear, we can tend to that later!

MR. ABRAMS (*sharply*): Let her finish the note!

PORTRAIT OF A MADONNA

MISS COLLINS (*straightening with a frightened smile*): It's—finished.

NURSE: All right, dear, come along. (*She propels her firmly toward the door.*)

MISS COLLINS (*turning suddenly back*): Oh, Mr. Abrams!

MR. ABRAMS: Yes, Miss Collins?

MISS COLLINS: If he should come again—and find me gone—I'd rather you didn't tell him—about the baby. . . . I think its better for me to tell him *that*. (*Gently smiling.*) You know how men *are*, don't you?

MR. ABRAMS: Yes, Miss Collins.

PORTER: Goodbye, Miss Collins. (*The NURSE pulls firmly at her arm. She smiles over her shoulder with a slight apologetic gesture.*)

MISS COLLINS: Mother will bring in—something cool—after while . . . (*She disappears down the hall with the NURSE. The elevator door clangs shut with the metallic sound of a locked cage. The wires hum.*)

MR. ABRAMS: She wrote him a note.

PORTER: What did she write, Mr. Abrams?

MR. ABRAMS: "Dear—Richard. I'm going away for a while. But don't worry, I'll be back. I have a secret to tell you. Love—Lucretia." (*He coughs.*) We got to clear out this 'stuff' an' pile it down in the basement till I find out where it goes.

PORTER (*dully*): Tonight, Mr. Abrams?

MR. ABRAMS (*roughly to hide his feeling*): No, no, not tonight, you old fool. Enough has happened tonight! (*Then gently.*) We can do it tomorrow. Turn out that bedroom light—and close the window. (*Music playing softly becomes audible as the men go out slowly, closing the door, and the light fades out.*)

CURTAIN

Auto-Da-Fé

A TRAGEDY IN ONE ACT

C H A R A C T E R S

MME. DUVENET

ELOI

Her son

**Pronounced Ell-wah. The part is created for Mr. John Abbott.*

Auto-Da-Fé

SCENE: *The front porch of an old frame cottage in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans. There are palm or banana trees, one on either side of the porch steps: pots of geraniums and other vivid flowers along the low balustrade. There is an effect of sinister antiquity in the setting, even the flowers suggesting the richness of decay. Not far off on Bourbon Street the lurid procession of bars and hot-spots throws out distance-muted strains of the juke-organs and occasional shouts of laughter.*
MME. DUVENET, a frail woman of sixty-seven, is rocking on the porch in the faint, sad glow of an August sunset. ELOI, her son, comes out the screen-door. He is a frail man in his late thirties, a gaunt, ascetic type with feverish dark eyes.

Mother and son are both fanatics and their speech has something of the quality of poetic or religious incantation.

MME. DUVENET: Why did you speak so crossly to Miss Bordelon?

ELOI (*standing against the column*): She gets on my nerves.

MME. DUVENET: You take a dislike to every boarder we get.

ELOI: She's not to be trusted. I think she goes in my room.

MME. DUVENET: What makes you think that?

ELOI: I've found some evidence of it.

MME. DUVENET: Well, I can assure you she doesn't go in your room.

ELOI: Somebody goes in my room and roots through my things.

MME. DUVENET: Nobody ever touches a thing in your room.

ELOI: My room is my own. I don't want anyone in it.

MME. DUVENET: You know very well that I have to go in to clean it.

ELOI: I don't want it cleaned.

MME. DUVENET: You want the room to be filthy?

ELOI: Just don't go in it to clean it or anything else.

MME. DUVENET: How could you live in a room that was never cleaned?

ELOI: I'll clean it myself when cleaning is necessary.

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MME. DUVENET: A person would think that you were concealing something.

ELOI: What would I have to conceal?

MME. DUVENET: Nothing that I can imagine. That's why it's so strange that you have such a strong objection to even your mother going into your room.

ELOI: Everyone wants a little privacy, Mother.

MME. DUVENET (*stiffly*): Your privacy, Eloi, shall be regarded as sacred.

ELOI: Huh.

MME. DUVENET: I'll just allow the filth to accumulate there.

ELOI (*sharply*): What do you mean by "the filth"?

MME. DUVENET (*sadly*): The dust and disorder that you would rather live in than have your mother come in to clean it up.

ELOI: Your broom and your dust-pan wouldn't accomplish much. Even the air in this neighbourhood is unclean.

MME. DUVENET: It is not as clean as it might be. I love clean window-curtains, I love white linen, I want immaculate, spotless things in a house.

ELOI: Then why don't we move to the new part of town where it's cleaner?

MME. DUVENET: The property in this block has lost all value. We couldn't sell our place for what it would cost us to put new paint on the walls.

ELOI: I don't understand you, Mother. You harp on purity, purity all the time, and yet you're willing to stay in the midst of corruption.

MME. DUVENET: I harp on nothing. I stay here because I have to. And as for corruption, I've never allowed it to touch me.

ELOI: It does, it does. We can't help breathing it here. It gets in our nostrils and even goes in our blood.

MME. DUVENET: I think you're the one that harps on things around here. You won't talk quietly. You always fly off on some tangent and raise your voice and get us all stirred up for no good reason.

ELOI: I've had about all that I can put up with, Mother!

MME. DUVENET: Then what do you want to do?

ELOI: Move, move. This asthma of mine, in a pure atmosphere

AUTO-DA-FÉ

uptown where the air is fresher, I know that I wouldn't have it nearly so often.

MME. DUVENET: I leave it entirely to you. If you can find someone to make an acceptable offer, I'm willing to move.

ELOI: You don't have the power to move or the will to break from anything that you're used to. You don't know how much we've been affected already!

MME. DUVENET: By what, Eloi?

ELOI: This fetid old swamp we live in, the Vieux Carré! Every imaginable kind of degeneracy springs up here, not at arm's length, even, but right in our presence!

MME. DUVENET: Now I think you're exaggerating a little.

ELOI: You read the papers, you hear people talk, you walk past open windows. You can't be entirely unconscious of what goes on! A woman was horribly mutilated last night. A man smashed a bottle and twisted the jagged end of it in her face.

MME. DUVENET: They bring such things on themselves by their loose behaviour.

ELOI: Night after night there are crimes taking place in the parks.

MME. DUVENET: The parks aren't all in the Quarter.

ELOI: The parks aren't all in the Quarter but decadence is. This is the primary lesion, the—focal infection, the—chancre! In medical language, it spreads by—metastasis! It creeps through the capillaries and into the main blood vessels. From there it is spread all through the surrounding tissue! Finally nothing is left outside the decay!

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, you are being unnecessarily violent in your speech.

ELOI: I feel that strongly about it.

MME. DUVENET: You mustn't allow yourself to sound like a fanatic.

ELOI: You take no stand against it?

MME. DUVENET: You know the stand that I take.

ELOI: I know what ought to be done.

MME. DUVENET: There ought to be legislation to make for reforms.

ELOI: Not only reforms but action really drastic!

MME. DUVENET: I favour that, too, within all practical bounds.

ELOI: Practical, practical. You can't be practical, Mother, and wipe out evil! The town should be razed.

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MME. DUVENET: You mean this old section torn down?

ELOI: Condemned and demolished!

MME. DUVENET: That's not a reasonable stand.

ELOI: It's the stand I take.

MME. DUVENET: Then I'm afraid you're not a reasonable person.

ELOI: I have good precedence for it.

MME. DUVENET: What do you mean?

ELOI: All through the Scriptures are cases of cities destroyed by the justice of fire when they got to be nests of foulness!

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, Eloi.

ELOI: Condemn it, I say, and purify it with fire!

MME. DUVENET: You're breathing hoarsely. That's what brings on asthma, over-excitement, not just breathing bad air!

ELOI (*after a thoughtful pause*): I *am* breathing hoarsely.

MME. DUVENET: Sit down and try to relax.

ELOI: I can't any more.

MME. DUVENET: You'd better go in and take an anytal tablet.

ELOI: I don't want to get to depending too much on drugs. I'm not very well, I'm never well any more.

MME. DUVENET: You never will take the proper care of yourself.

ELOI: I can hardly remember the time when I really felt good.

MME. DUVENET: You've never been quite as strong as I'd like you to be.

ELOI: I seem to have chronic fatigue.

MME. DUVENET: The Duvenet trouble has always been mostly with nerves.

ELOI: Look! I had a sinus infection! You call that nerves?

MME. DUVENET: No, but——

ELOI: Look! This asthma, this choking, this suffocation I have, do you call that nerves?

MME. DUVENET: I never agreed with the doctor about that condition.

ELOI: You hate all doctors, you're rabid on the subject!

MME. DUVENET: I think all healing begins with faith in the spirit.

ELOI: How can I keep on going when I don't sleep?

MME. DUVENET: I think your insomnia's caused by eating at night.

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ELOI: It soothes my stomach.

MME. DUVENET: Liquids would serve that purpose!

ELOI: Liquids don't satisfy me.

MME. DUVENET: Well, something digestible, then. A little hot cereal maybe with cocoa or Postum.

ELOI: All that kind of slop is nauseating to look at!

MME. DUVENET: I notice at night you won't keep the covers on you.

ELOI: I can't stand covers in summer.

MME. DUVENET: You've got to have something over your body at night.

ELOI: Oh, Lord, oh, Lord.

MME. DUVENET: Your body perspires and when it's exposed you catch cold!

ELOI: You're rabid upon the subject of catching cold.

MME. DUVENET: Only because you're unusually prone to colds.

ELOI (*with curdled intensity*): It isn't a cold! It is a sinus infection!

MME. DUVENET: Sinus infection and all catarrhal conditions are caused by the same things as colds!

ELOI: At ten every morning, as regular as clock-work, a headache commences and doesn't let up till late in the afternoon.

MME. DUVENET: Nasal congestion is often the cause of headache.

ELOI: Nasal congestion has nothing to do with this one!

MME. DUVENET: How do you know?

ELOI: It isn't in that location!

MME. DUVENET: Where is it, then?

ELOI: It's here at the base of the skull. And it runs around here.

MME. DUVENET: Around where?

ELOI: Around here!

MME. DUVENET (*touching his forehead*): Oh! There!

ELOI: No, no, are you blind? I said *here*!

MME. DUVENET: Oh, here!

ELOI: *Yes! Here!*

MME. DUVENET: Well, that could be eye-strain.

ELOI: When I've just changed my glasses?

MME. DUVENET: You read consistently in the wrong kind of light.

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ELOI: You seem to think I'm a saboteur of myself.

MME. DUVENET: You actually are.

ELOI: You just don't know. (*darkly*) There's lots of things that you don't know about, Mother.

MME. DUVENET: I've never pretended nor wished to know a great deal, (*They fall into a silence, and MME. DUVENET rocks slowly back and forth. The light is nearly gone. A distant juke-box can be heard playing "The New San Antonio Rose." She speaks, finally, in a gentle, liturgical tone.*) There are three simple rules I wish that you would observe. One: you should wear under-shirts whenever there's changeable weather! Two: don't sleep without covers, don't kick them off in the night! Three: chew your food, don't gulp it. Eat like a human being and not like a dog! In addition to those three very simple rules of common hygiene, all that you need is faith in spiritual healing! (*ELOI looks at her for a moment in weary desperation. Then he groans aloud and rises from the steps.*) Why that look, and the groan?

ELOI (*intensely*): You—just—don't—know!

MME. DUVENET: Know what?

ELOI: Your world is so simple, you live in a fool's paradise!

MME. DUVENET: Do I indeed!

ELOI: Yes, Mother, you do indeed! I stand in your presence a stranger, a person unknown! I live in a house where nobody knows my name!

MME. DUVENET: You tire me, Eloi, when you become so excited!

ELOI: You just don't know. You rock on the porch and talk about clean white curtains! While I'm all flame, all burning, and no bell rings, nobody gives an alarm!

MME. DUVENET: What are you talking about?

ELOI: Intolerable burden! The conscience of all dirty men!

MME. DUVENET: I don't understand you.

ELOI: How can I speak any plainer?

MME. DUVENET: You go to confession!

ELOI: The priest is a cripple in skirts!

MME. DUVENET: How can you say that!

ELOI: Because I have seen his skirts and his crutches[†] and heard his meaningless mumble through the wall!

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MME. DUVENET: Don't speak like that in my presence!

ELOI: It's worn-out magic, it doesn't burn any more!

MME. DUVENET: Burn any more? Why should it!

ELOI: Because there needs to be burning!

MME. DUVENET: For what?

ELOI (*leaning against the column*): For the sake of burning, for God, for the purification! Oh, God, oh, God. I can't go back in the house, and I can't stay out on the porch! I can't even breathe very freely, I don't know what is about to happen to me!

MME. DUVENET: You're going to bring on an attack. Sit down! Now tell me quietly and calmly what is the matter? What have you had on your mind for the last ten days?

ELOI: How do you know that I've had something on my mind?

MME. DUVENET: You've had something on your mind since a week ago Tuesday.

ELOI: Yes, that's true. I have. I didn't suppose you'd noticed . . .

MME. DUVENET: What happened at the post-office?

ELOI: How did you guess it was there?

MME. DUVENET: Because there is nothing at home to explain your condition.

ELOI (*leaning back exhaustedly*): No.

MME. DUVENET: Then obviously it was something where you work.

ELOI: Yes . . .

MME. DUVENET: What was it, Eloi? (*Far down the street a tamale vendor cries out in his curiously rich haunting voice: "Re-ed bo-ot, re-ed bo-ot, re-e-ed!" He moves in the other direction and fades from bearing.*) What was it, Eloi?

ELOI: A letter.

MME. DUVENET: You got a letter from someone? And that upset you?

ELOI: I didn't get any letter.

MME. DUVENET: Then what did you mean by "a letter"?

ELOI: A letter came into my hands by accident, Mother.

MME. DUVENET: While you were sorting the mail?

ELOI: Yes.

MME. DUVENET: What was there about it to prey on your mind so much?

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ELOI: The letter was mailed unsealed, and something fell out.

MME. DUVENET: Something fell out of the unsealed envelope?

ELOI: Yes!

MME. DUVENET: What was it fell out?

ELOI: A picture.

MME. DUVENET: A what?

ELOI: A picture!

MME. DUVENET: What kind of a picture? (*He does not answer. The juke-box starts playing again the same tune with its uliotic gaiety in the distance.*) Eloi, what kind of a picture fell out of the envelope?

ELOI (*gently and sadly*): Miss Bordelon is standing in the hall and overhearing every word I say.

MME. DUVENET (*turning sharply*): She's not in the hall.

ELOI: Her car is clapped to the door!

MME. DUVENET: She's in her bedroom reading.

ELOI: Reading what?

MME. DUVENET: How do I know what she's reading? What difference does it make what she is reading!

ELOI: She keeps a journal of everything said in the house. I feel her taking short-hand notes at the table!

MME. DUVENET: Why, for what purpose, would she take short-hand notes on our conversation?

ELOI: Haven't you heard of hired investigators?

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, you're talking and saying such horrible things!

ELOI (*gently*): I may be wrong. I may be wrong.

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, of course you're mistaken! Now go on and tell me what you started to say about the picture.

ELOI: A lewd photograph fell out of the envelope.

MME. DUVENET: A what?

ELOI: An indecent picture.

MME. DUVENET: Of whom?

ELOI: Of two naked figures.

MME. DUVENET: Oh! . . . That's all it was?

ELOI: You haven't looked at the picture.

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MME. DUVENET: Was it so bad?

ELOI: It passes beyond all description!

MME. DUVENET: As bad as all that?

ELOI: No. Worse. I felt as though something exploded, blew up in my hands, and scalded my face with acid!

MME. DUVENET: Who sent this horrible photograph to you, Eloi?

ELOI: It wasn't to me.

MME. DUVENET: Who was it addressed to?

ELOI: One of those—opulent—antique dealers on—Royal . . .

MME. DUVENET: And who was the sender? •

ELOI: A university student.

MME. DUVENET: Isn't the sender liable to prosecution?

ELOI: Of course. And to years in prison.

MME. DUVENET: I see no reason for clemency in such a case.

ELOI: Neither did I.

MME. DUVENET: Then what did you do about it?

ELOI: I haven't done anything yet.

MME. DUVENET: Eloi! You haven't reported it to the authorities yet!

ELOI: I haven't reported it to the authorities yet.

MME. DUVENET: I can't imagine one reason to hesitate!

ELOI: I couldn't proceed without some investigation.

MME. DUVENET: Investigation? Of what?

ELOI: Of all the circumstances around the case.

MME. DUVENET: What circumstances are there to think of but the fact that somebody used the mails for that purpose!

ELOI: The youth of the sender has something to do with the case.

MME. DUVENET: The sender was young?

ELOI: The sender was only nineteen.

MME. DUVENET: And are the sender's parents still alive?

ELOI: Both of them still living and in the city. The sender happens to be an only child.

MME. DUVENET: How do you know these facts about the sender?

ELOI: Because I've conducted a private investigation.

MME. DUVENET: How did you go about that?

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ELOI: I called on the sender, I went to the dormitory. We talked in private and everything was discussed. The attitude taken was that I had come for money. That I was intending to hold the letter for blackmail.

MME. DUVENET: How perfectly awful.

ELOI: Of course I had to explain that I was a federal employee who had some obligation to his employers, and that it was really excessively fair on my part to even delay the action that ought to be taken.

MME. DUVENET: The action that has to be taken!

ELOI: And then the sender began to be ugly. Abusive. I can't repeat the charges, the evil suggestions! I ran from the room. I left my hat in the room. I couldn't even go back to pick it up!

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, Eloi. Oh, my dear Eloi, When did this happen, the interview with the sender?

ELOI: The interview was on Friday.

MME. DUVENET: Three days ago. And you haven't done anything yet?

ELOI: I thought and I thought and I couldn't take any action!

MME. DUVENET: Now it's too late.

ELOI: Why do you say it's too late?

MME. DUVENET: You've held the letter too long to take any action.

ELOI: Oh, no, I haven't. I'm not paralysed any longer.

MME. DUVENET: But if you report on the letter now they will ask why you haven't reported on it sooner!

ELOI: I can explain the responsibility of it!

MME. DUVENET: No, no, it's much better not to do anything now!

ELOI: I've got to do something.

MME. DUVENET: You'd better destroy the letter.

ELOI: And let the offenders go scot free?

MME. DUVENET: What else can you do since you've hesitated so long!

ELOI: There's got to be punishment for it!

MME. DUVENET: Where is the letter?

ELOI: I have it here in my pocket.

MME. DUVENET: You have that thing on your person?

ELOI: My inside pocket.

MME. DUVENET: Oh, Eloi, how stupid, how foolish! Suppose

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something happened and something like that was found on you while you were unconscious and couldn't explain how you got it.

ELOI: Lower your voice! That woman is listening to us!

MME. DUVENET: Miss Bodelon? No!

ELOI: She is, she is. She's hired as investigator. She claps her ear to the wall when I talk in my sleep!

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, Eloi.

ELOI: They've hired her to spy, to poke and pry in the house!

MME. DUVENET: Who do you mean?

ELOI: The sender, the antique-dealer!

MME. DUVENET: You're talking so wildly you scare me. Eloi, you've got to destroy that letter at once!

ELOI: Destroy it?

MME. DUVENET: Yes!

ELOI: How?

MME. DUVENET: Burn it! (ELOI rises unsteadily. For a third time the distant juke-organ begins to grind out "The New San Antonio Rose," with its polka rhythm and cries of insane exultation.)

ELOI (*faintly*): Yes, yes—burn it!

MME. DUVENET: Burn it this very instant!

ELOI: I'll take it inside to burn it.

MME. DUVENET: No, burn it right here in my presence.

ELOI: You can't look at it.

MME. DUVENET: My God, my God, I would pluck out my eyes before they would look at that picture!

ELOI (*boarsely*): I think it is better to go in the kitchen or basement.

MME. DUVENET: No, no, Eloi, burn it here! On the porch!

ELOI: Somebody might see.

MME. DUVENET: What of it?

ELOI: It might be thought that it was something of mine.

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, Eloi, take it out and burn it! Do you hear me? Burn it now! This instant!

ELOI: Turn your back. I'll take it out of my pocket.

MME. DUVENET (*turning*): Have you matches, Eloi?

ELOI (*sadly*): Yes, I have them, Mother.

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MME. DUVENET: Very well, then. Burn the letter and burn the terrible picture. (ELOI fumblingly removes some papers from his inside pocket. His hand is shaking so that the picture falls from his grasp to the porch-steps. ELOI groans as he stoops slowly to pick it up.) Eloi! What is the matter?

ELOI: I—dropped the picture.

MME. DUVENET: Pick it up and set fire to it quickly!

ELOI: Yes . . . (He strikes a match. His face is livid in the glow of the flame and as he stares at the slip of paper, his eyes seem to start from his head. He is breathing hoarsely. He draws the flame and the paper within one inch of each other but seems unable to move them any closer. All at once he utters a strangled cry and lets the match fall.)

MME. DUVENET (turning): Eloi, you've burned your fingers!

ELOI: Yes!

MME. DUVENET: Oh, come in the kitchen and let me put soda on it! (ELOI turns and goes quickly into the house. She starts to follow.) Go right in the kitchen! We'll put on baking soda! (She reaches for the handle of the screen door. ELOI slips the latch into place. MADAME DUVENET pulls the door and finds it locked.) Eloi! (He stares at her through the screen. A note of terror comes into her voice.) Eloi! You've latched the door! What are you thinking of, Eloi? (ELOI backs slowly away and out of sight.) Eloi, Eloi! Come back here and open this door! (A door slams inside the house, and the boarder's voice is raised in surprise and anger. MME. DUVENET is now calling frantically.) Eloi, Eloi! Why have you locked me out? What are you doing in there? Open the screen-door, please! (ELOI's voice is raised violently. The woman inside cries out with fear. There is a metallic clatter as though a tin object were hurled against a wall. The woman screams; then there is a muffled explosion. MME. DUVENET claws and beats at the screen door.) Eloi! Eloi! Oh, answer me, Eloi! (There is a sudden burst of fiery light from the interior of the cottage. It spills through the screen door and out upon the clawing, witch-like figure of the old woman. She screams in panic and turns dizzily about. With stiff grotesque movements and gestures, she staggers down the porch-steps, and begins to shout hoarsely and despairingly.) Fire! Fire! The house in on fire, on fire, the house is on fire!

CURTAIN

Lord Byron's Love Letter

CHARACTERS.

THE SPINSTER

THE OLD WOMAN

THE MAIDRON

THE HUSBAND

Lord Byron's Love Letter

SCENE: *The parlour of a faded old residence in the French Quarter of New Orleans in the late nineteenth century. The shuttered doors of the room open directly upon the sidewalk and the noise of the Mardi Gras festivities can be faintly distinguished. The interior is very dusky. Beside a rose-shaded lamp, the SPINSTER, a woman of forty, is sewing. In the opposite corner, completely motionless, the OLD WOMAN sits in a black silk dress. The doorbell tinkles.*

SPINSTER (*rising*): It's probably someone coming to look at the letter.

OLD WOMAN (*rising on her cane*): Give me time to get out. (*She withdraws gradually behind the curtains. One of her claw-like hands remains visible, holding a curtain slightly open so that she can watch the visitors. The SPINSTER opens the door and the MATRON, a middle-aged woman, walks into the room.*)

SPINSTER: Won't you come in?

MATRON: Thank you.

SPINSTER: You're from out of town?

MATRON: Oh, yes, we're all the way from Milwaukee. We've come for Mardi Gras, my husband and I. (*She suddenly notices a stuffed canary in its tiny pink and ivory cage.*) Oh, this poor little bird in such a tiny cage! It's much too small to keep a canary in!

SPINSTER: It isn't a live canary.

OLD WOMAN (*from behind the curtain*): No. It's stuffed.

MATRON: Oh. (*She self-consciously touches a stuffed bird on her hat.*) Winston is out there dilly-dallying on the street, afraid he'll miss the parade. The parade comes by here, don't it?

SPINSTER: Yes, unfortunately it does.

MATRON: I noticed your sign at the door. Is it true that you have one of Lord Byron's love letters?

LORD BYRON'S LOVE LETTER

SPINSTER: Yes.

MATRON: How very interesting! How did you get it?

SPINSTER: It was written to my grandmother, Irénée Marguerite de Poitevent.

MATRON: How very interesting! Where did she meet Lord Byron?

SPINSTER: On the steps of the Acropolis in Athens.

MATRON: How very, *very* interesting! I didn't know that Lord Byron was ever in Greece.

SPINSTER: Lord Byron spent the final years of his turbulent life in Greece.

OLD WOMAN (*still behind the curtains*): He was exiled from England!

SPINSTER: Yes, he went into voluntary exile from England.

OLD WOMAN: Because of scandalous gossip in the Regent's court.

SPINSTER: Yes, involving his half-sister!

OLD WOMAN: It was false—completely.

SPINSTER: It was never confirmed.

OLD WOMAN: He was a passionate man but not an evil man.

SPINSTER: Morals are such ambiguous matters, I think.

MATRON: Won't the lady behind the curtains come in?

SPINSTER: You'll have to excuse her. She prefers to stay out.

MATRON (*stiffly*): Oh. I see. What was Lord Byron doing in Greece, may I ask?

OLD WOMAN (*proudly*): *Fighting for freedom!*

SPINSTER: Yes, Lord Byron went to Greece to join the forces that fought against the infidels.

OLD WOMAN: He gave his life in defence of the universal cause of freedom!

MATRON: What was that, did she say?

SPINSTER (*repeating automatically*): He gave his life in defence of the universal cause of freedom.

MATRON: Oh, how very interesting!

OLD WOMAN: Also he swam the Hellespont.

SPINSTER: Yes.

LORD BYRON'S LOVE LETTER

OLD WOMAN: And burned the body of the poet Shelley who was drowned in a storm on the Mediterranean with a volume of Keats in his pocket!

MATRON (*incredulously*): Pardon?

SPINSTER (*repeating*): And burned the body of the poet Shelley who was drowned in a storm on the Mediterranean with a volume of Keats in his pocket.

MATRON: Oh. How very, very interesting! Indeed. I'd like so much to have my husband hear it. Do you mind if I just step out for a moment to call him in?

SPINSTER: Please do. (*The MATRON steps out quickly, calling, "Winston! Winston!"*)

OLD WOMAN (*poking her head out for a moment*): Watch them carefully! Keep a sharp eye on them!

SPINSTER: Yes. Be still. (*The MATRON returns with her husband who has been drinking and wears a paper cap sprinkled with confetti.*)

MATRON: Winston, remove that cap. Sit down on the sofa. These ladies are going to show us Lord Byron's love letter.

SPINSTER: Shall I proceed?

MATRON: Oh, yes. This—uh—is my husband—Mr. Tutwiler.

SPINSTER (*coldly*): How do you do.

MATRON: I am Mrs. Tutwiler.

SPINSTER: Of course. Please keep your seat.

MATRON (*nervously*): He's been—celebrating a little.

OLD WOMAN (*shaking the curtain that conceals her*): Ask him please to be careful with his cigar.

SPINSTER: Oh, that's all right, you may use this bowl for your ashes.

OLD WOMAN: Smoking is such an unnecessary habit!

HUSBAND: Uh?

MATRON: This lady was telling us how her Grandmother happened to meet Lord Byron. In Italy, wasn't it?

SPINSTER: No.

OLD WOMAN (*firmly*): In Greece, in Athens, on the steps of the

LORD BYRON'S LOVE LETTER

Acropolis! We've mentioned that *twice*, I believe. Ariadne, you may read them a passage from the journal first.

SPINSTER: Yes.

OLD WOMAN: But please be careful what you choose to read! (*The SPINSTER has removed from the secretary a volume wrapped in tissue and tied with a ribbon.*)

SPINSTER: Like many other young American girls of that day and this, my Grandmother went to Europe.

OLD WOMAN: The year before she was going to be presented to society!

MATRON: How old was she?

OLD WOMAN: Sixteen! Barely sixteen! She was very beautiful, too! Please show her the picture, show these people the picture! It's in the front of the journal. (*The SPINSTER removes the picture from the book and hands it to the MATRON.*)

MATRON (*taking a look*): What a lovely young girl. (*Passing it to the HUSBAND.*) Don't you think it resembles Agnes a little?

HUSBAND: Uh.

OLD WOMAN: Watch out! Ariadne, you'll have to *watch* that man. I believe he's been drinking. I *do* believe that he's been——

HUSBAND (*truculently*): Yeah? What is she saying back there?

MATRON (*touching his arm warningly*): Winston! Be quiet.

HUSBAND: Uh!

SPINSTER (*quickly*): Near the end of her tour, my Grandmother and her Aunt went to Greece, to study the classic remains of the oldest civilization.

OLD WOMAN (*correcting*): The oldest *European* civilization.

SPINSTER: It was an early morning in April of the year eighteen hundred and——

OLD WOMAN: Twenty-seven!

SPINSTER: Yes. In my Grandmother's journal she mentions——

OLD WOMAN: Read it, read it, *read* it.

MATRON: Yes, *please* read it to us.

SPINSTER: I'm trying to find the place, if you'll just be patient.

LORD BYRON'S LOVE LETTER

MATRON: Certainly, excuse me. (*She punches her HUSBAND who is nodding.*, Winston!

SPINSTER: Ah, here it is.

OLD WOMAN: Be *careful!* Remember where to *stop* at, Ariadne!

SPINSTER: Shhh! (*She adjusts her glasses and seats herself by the lamp.*)

"We set out early that morning to inspect the ruins of the Acropolis. I know I shall never forget how extraordinarily pure the atmosphere was that morning. It seemed as though the world were not very old, but very, very young, almost as though the world had been newly created. There was a taste of earliness in the air, a feeling of freshness, exhilarating my senses, exalting my spirit. How shall I tell you, dear Diary, the way the sky looked? It was almost as though I had moistened the tip of my pen in a shallow bowl full of milk, so delicate was the blue in the dome of the heavens. The sun was barely up yet, a tentative breeze disturbed the ends of my scarf, the plumes of the marvellous hat which I had bought in Paris and thrilled me with pride whenever I saw them reflected! The papers that morning, we read them over our coffee before we left the hotel, had spoken of possible war, but it seemed unlikely, unreal: nothing was real, indeed, but the spell of golden antiquity and rose-coloured romance that breathed from this fabulous city."

OLD WOMAN: Skip that part! Get on to where she meets him!

SPINSTER: Yes. . . . (*She turns several pages and continues.*) "Out of the tongues of ancients, the lyrical voices of many long-ago poets who dreamed of the world of ideals, who had in their hearts the pure and absolute image——"

OLD WOMAN: Skip that part! Slip down to where——

SPINSTER: Yes! *Here!* Do let us manage without any more *interruptions!* "The carriage came to a halt at the foot of the hill and my Aunt, not being too well——"

OLD WOMAN: She had a sore throat that morning.

SPINSTER: "—preferred to remain with the driver while I undertook the rather steep climb on foot. As I ascended the long and crumbling flight of old stone steps——"

OLD WOMAN: Yes, yes, that's the place! (*The SPINSTER looks up*

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in annoyance. The OLD WOMAN's cane taps impatiently behind the curtains.) Go on, Ariadne!

SPINSTER: "I could not help observing continually above me a man who walked with a barely perceptible limp——"

OLD WOMAN (*in busied wonder*): Yes—Lord Byron!

SPINSTER: "—and as he turned now and then to observe beneath him the lovely panorama——"

OLD WOMAN: Actually he was watching the girl behind him!

SPINSTER (*sharply*): Will you *please* let me finish! (*There is no answer from behind the curtains, and she continues to read.*) "I was irresistibly impressed by the unusual nobility and refinement of his features!" (*She turns a page.*)

OLD WOMAN: The handsomest man that ever walked the earth! (*She emphasizes the speech with three slow but loud taps of her cane.*)

SPINSTER (*flurriedly*): "The strength and grace of his throat, like that of a statue, the classic outlines of his profile, the sensitive lips and the slightly dilated nostrils, the dark lock of hair that fell down over his forehead in such a way that——"

OLD WOMAN (*tapping her cane rapidly*): Skip that, it goes on for pages!

SPINSTER: ". . . When he had reached the very summit of the Acropolis he spread out his arms in a great, magnificent gesture like a young god. Now, thought I to myself, Apollo has come to earth in modern dress."

OLD WOMAN: Go on, skip that, get on to where she *meets* him!

SPINSTER: "Fearing to interrupt his poetic trance, I slackened my pace and pretended to watch the view. I kept my look thus carefully averted until the narrowness of the steps compelled me to move close by him."

OLD WOMAN: Of course he pretended not to see she was coming!

SPINSTER: "Then finally I faced him."

OLD WOMAN: Yes!

SPINSTER: "Our eyes came together!"

OLD WOMAN: Yes! Yes! That's the part!

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SPINSTER: "A thing which I don't understand had occurred between us, a flush as of recognition swept through my whole being! Suffused my——"

OLD WOMAN: Yes . . . Yes, that's the part!

SPINSTER: "'Pardon me,' he exclaimed, 'you have dropped your glove!' And indeed to my surprise I found that I had, and as he returned it to me, his fingers ever so slightly pressed the cups of my palm."

OLD WOMAN (*hoarsely*): Yes! (*Her bony fingers clutch higher up on the curtain, the other hand also appears, slightly widening the aperture.*)

SPINSTER: "Believe me, dear Diary, I became quite faint and breathless, I almost wondered if I could continue my lonely walk through the ruins. Perhaps I stumbled, perhaps I swayed a little. I leaned for a moment against the side of a column. The sun seemed terribly brilliant, it hurt my eyes. Close behind me I heard that voice again, a voice: it seemed I could feel his breath on my——"

OLD WOMAN: Stop *there*! That will be quite enough! (*The SPINSTER closes the journal.*)

MATRON: Oh, is that all?

OLD WOMAN: There's a great deal more that's not to be read to people.

MATRON: Oh.

SPINSTER: I'm sorry. I'll show you the letter.

MATRON: How nice! I'm dying to see it! Winston? *Do sit up!* (*He has nearly fallen asleep. The SPINSTER produces from the cabinet another small packet which she unfolds. It contains the letter. She hands it to the MATRON, who starts to open it.*)

OLD WOMAN: Watch out, watch out, that woman can't *open* the letter!

SPINSTER: No, no, please, you mustn't. The contents of the letter are strictly private. I'll hold it over here at a little distance so you can see the writing.

OLD WOMAN: Not too close, she's holding up her glasses! (*The MATRON quickly lowers her lorgnette.*)

SPINSTER: Only a short while later Byron was killed.

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MATRON: How did he die?

OLD WOMAN: He was killed in action, defending the cause of freedom! (*This is uttered so strongly the HUSBAND starts.*)

SPINSTER: When my Grandmother received the news of Lord Byron's death in battle, she retired from the world and remained in complete seclusion for the rest of her life.

MATRON: Tch-tch-tch! How dreadful! I think that was foolish of her. (*The cane taps furiously behind the curtains.*)

SPINSTER: You don't understand. When a life is completed, it ought to be put away. It's like a sonnet. When you've written the final couplet, why go on any further? You only destroy the part that's already written!

OLD WOMAN: Read them the poem, the sonnet your Grandmother wrote to the memory of Lord Byron.

SPINSTER: Would you be interested?

MATRON: We'd adore it—truly!

SPINSTER: It's called *Enchantment*.

MATRON (*she assumes a rapt expression*): Aabbbb!

SPINSTER (*reciting*):

“*Un saison enchanté!* I mused, Beguiled
Seemed Time herself, her erstwhile errant ways
Briefly forgotten, she stayed here and smiled,
Caught in a net of blue and golden days.”

OLD WOMAN: Not blue and golden—gold and azure days!

SPINSTER:

“Caught in a net—of gold and azure days!

But I lacked wit to see how lightly shoon
Were Time and you, to vagrancy so used——”

(*The OLD WOMAN begins to accompany in a hoarse undertone.
Faint band music can be heard.*)

“That by the touch of one October moon
From summer's tranquil spell you might be loosed!”

OLD WOMAN (*rising stridently with intense feeling above the SPINSTER's voice*):

LORD BYRON'S LOVE LETTER

"Think you love is writ on my soul with chalk,
To be washed off by a few parting tears?
Then you know not with what slow step I walk
The barren way of those hibernal years—

My life a vanished interlude, a shell

Whose walls are your first kiss—and last farewell!"

(The band, leading the parade, has started down the street, growing rapidly louder. It passes by like the heedless, turbulent years. The HUSBAND, roused from his stupor, lunges to the door.)

MATRON: What's that, what's that? The parade? *(The HUSBAND slaps the paper cap on his head and rushes for the door.)*

HUSBAND *(at the door)*: Come on, Mama, you'll miss it!

SPINSTER *(quickly)*: We usually accept—you understand?—a small sum of money, just anything that you happen to think you can spare.

OLD WOMAN: Stop him! He's gone outside! *(The HUSBAND has escaped to the street. The band blares through the door.)*

SPINSTER *(extending her hand)*: Please—a dollar . . .

OLD WOMAN: Fifty cents!

SPINSTER: Or a quarter!

MATRON *(paying no attention to them)*: Oh, my goodness—Winston! He's disappeared in the crowd! Winston—Winston! Excuse me! *(She rushes out onto the door sill.)* Winston! Oh, my goodness gracious, he's off again!

SPINSTER *(quickly)*: We usually accept a little money for the display of the letter. Whatever you feel that you are able to give. As a matter of fact it's all that we have to live on!

OLD WOMAN *(loudly)*: One dollar!

SPINSTER: Fifty cents—or a quarter!

MATRON *(oblivious, at the door)*: Winston! Winston! Heavenly days. Goodbye! *(She rushes out on the street. The SPINSTER follows to the door, and shields her eyes from the light as she looks after the MATRON. A stream of confetti is tossed through the doorway into her face. Trumpets blare. She slams the door shut and bolts it.)*

LORD BYRON'S LOVE LETTER

SPINSTER: *Canaille! . . . Canaille!*

OLD WOMAN. Gone? Without paying? *Cheated* us? (*She parts the curtains.*)

SPINSTER: *Yes—the canaille!* (*She fastidiously plucks the thread of confetti from her shoulder. The OLD WOMAN steps from behind the curtains, rigid with anger.*)

OLD WOMAN: Ariadne, my letter! You've dropped my letter! Your Grandfather's letter is lying on the floor!

CURTAIN

The Strangest Kind of Romance

A LYRIC PLAY IN FOUR SCENES

*The game enforces smirks; but we have seen
the moon in lonely alleys make
a grail of laughter of an empty ash can,
and through all sound of gaiety and quest
have heard a kit'en in the wilderness.*

HARRY CRANL (*Chaplinesque*)

CHARACTERS

THE LITTL MAN

THE LANDLADY

THE OLD MAN
Her father-in-law

THE BOYLR

NIICHIVO
The cat

The Strangest Kind of Romance

SCENE: *A furnished room in a small industrial city of the middle-western states. It resembles any such room except that the walls are covered with inscriptions, the signatures of former occupants of it, men who have stayed and passed along to other such places, the itinerant, unmarried working-men of a nation. There are two windows. One shows the delicate branches of a tree that is surrendering its leaves to late autumn. The other window admits a view of the bristling stacks of the great manufacturing plant which is the heart of the city.*

SCENE I

The LANDLADY, a heavy woman of forty who moves and speaks with a powerful sort of indolence, is showing the room to a prospective roomer, the LITTLE MAN, dark and more delicate and nervous in appearance than labourers usually are. As soon as he enters the door behind the LANDLADY, his remarkably dilapidated suitcase comes apart, spilling its contents over the floor—unlaundered shirts, old shoes, shoe-polish, a rosary.

LANDLADY (*laughing*): Well! The suitcase has decided!

LITTLE MAN (*stooping to replace the scattered articles*): It's been working loose all day.

LANDLADY: How long have you had that suitcase?

LITTLE MAN: Since I started travelling.

LANDLADY: You must be Gulliver, then! You've stood up under the strain a lot better than it has.

LITTLE MAN (*straightening*): I don't know.

LANDLADY: You ain't held together by such old worn-out ropes.

LITTLE MAN (*smiling shyly and sadly*): I don't know.

LANDLADY (*crossing to raise the window-blind*): About this room—I hope you ain't superstitious.

LITTLE MAN: Why?

LANDLADY: This room is one that a man lived in who had a bad run of luck.

THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE [SC. 1

LITTLE MAN: Oh. What happened to him? (*The LANDLADY suddenly observes the cat on the bed.*)

LANDLADY: Now how did that cat get in here? A little mystery, huh? She must've got up the pear tree, dropped on the roof of the porch, an' climbed in th' window. (*The LITTLE MAN sets down his valise and crosses gently smiling to the cat. He picks her up with great tenderness.*) She used to occupy this room with the Russian.

LITTLE MAN: The who?

LANDLADY: The fellow I mentioned who had the bad run of luck. I used to say I thought she brought it on him.

LITTLE MAN: They loved each other?

LANDLADY: I never seen such devotion.

LITTLE MAN: Then she couldn't have brought the bad luck on him. Nothing's unlucky that loves you. What's her name?

LANDLADY: Nitchevo.

LITTLE MAN: What?

LANDLADY: Nitchevo. That's what he called her. He told me once what it means but I've forgotten. It used to give me a pain.

LITTLE MAN: What?

LANDLADY: I'd come in here to talk. The circumstances I've got to live under are trying. I have a good deal of steam I need to blow off. He was a good listener.

LITTLE MAN: The Russian?

LANDLADY: Sympathetic, but silent. While I talked he was only watching the cat.

LITTLE MAN (*smiling a little*): And so you don't like her?

LANDLADY: NO. (*She sits comfortably on the bed.*) I'll tell you the story. He was a Russian or something. Polacks I usually call 'em. Occupied this room before he took sick. He'd found the cat in the alley an' brought her home an' fed her an' took care of 'er an' let 'er sleep in his bed. A dirty practice, animals in the bed. Don't you think so? (*The LITTLE MAN shrugs.*) Well—the work at the plant is unhealthy for even a strong-bodied man. The Polack broke down. Tuberculosis developed. He gets an indemnity of some kind and goes West. The cat—he wanted to take her with him. I set my foot down on that. I told him she'd disappeared. He left without her. Now I can't get rid of the dirty thing.

SC. 1] *THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE*

LITTLE MAN: The cat?

LANDLADY: Twice today I thrown cold water on her when she come slinking around here looking for him. See how she stares at me? Hatred. Withering hatred. Just like one jealous woman looks at another. I guess she's waiting around for him to come home.

LITTLE MAN: Will he?

LANDLADY: Never in this world.

LITTLE MAN: Dead?

LANDLADY: The sixteenth of January I got the notice. Wasn't nobody else to be informed. (*The LITTLE MAN nods with a sad smile and strokes the cat.*) Some people say an animal understands. I told her this morning. He ain't coming back, he's dead. But she don't understand it.

LITTLE MAN: I think she does. She's grieving. (*Holding her against his ear.*) Yes, I can hear her—grieving.

LANDLADY: You're a funny one, too. How does this bedroom suit you?

LITTLE MAN: It's a beautiful room.

LANDLADY: Who're you kidding?

LITTLE MAN: You. How much?

LANDLADY: Three-fifty—in advance.

LITTLE MAN: I will take it, provided—

LANDLADY: What? Provided?

LITTLE MAN: I can do like the Russian and keep the cat here with me.

LANDLADY (*grinning*): Oh, so you want to do like the Russian.

LITTLE MAN: Yes.

LANDLADY (*fixing her hair at the cracked mirror*): My husband's a chronic invalid. An injury at the plant.

LITTLE MAN: Yeah? I'm sorry.

LANDLADY: Codein every day. Fifty cents a pill is what it costs me. I wouldn't mind if only he wasn't such a pill sometimes himself. But who can look at suffering in a person?

LITTLE MAN: Nobody.

LANDLADY: Yes. That's how I feel. Well . . . the Russian used to help me out with man's work in the house.

THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE [SC. 1

LITTLE MAN: I see.

LANDLADY: How old are you? I bet I can guess! Thirty-five?

LITTLE MAN: Uh-huh. About.

LANDLADY: Eyetalian?

LITTLE MAN: Uh-huh.

LANDLADY: Wouldn't you think that I was a fortune-teller? My father was a Gypsy. He taught me a lot of the Zigeuner songs. He used to say to me, Bella, you're nine parts music—the rest is female mischief! (*She smiles at him.*) That instrument on the wall's a balalaika. Some right I'll drop in here to entertain you.

LITTLE MAN: Good. I heard you singing as I came up to the house. That's why I stopped. (*She smiles again and stands as if waiting.*)

LANDLADY: I'll call you Musso. Musso for Mussolini. You got a job?

LITTLE MAN: Not yet.

LANDLADY: Go down to the plant an' ask for Oliver Woodson.

LITTLE MAN: Oliver Woodson?

LANDLADY: Tell him Mizz Gallaway sent you. He'll put you right on the pay-roll.

LITTLE MAN: Good. Thanks.

LANDLADY: Linen's changed on Mondays. (*She starts to turn away.*) I got to apologize for the condition the walls are in.

LITTLE MAN: I noticed. Who did it?

LANDLADY: Every man who lived here signed his name.

LITTLE MAN: There must have been a lot.

LANDLADY: Birds of passage. You ever try to count them? Restlessness—changes.

LITTLE MAN (*smiling*): Yeah.

LANDLADY: You'd think a man with pay-money in his pocket would have something better to do than sign his name on the walls of a rented bedroom.

LITTLE MAN: Is the Russian's name here, too?

LANDLADY: Not his name, he couldn't write—but his picture. There! (*She points to a childish cartoon of a big man.*) Right beside it, look—tail—whiskers—the cut! (*They both laugh.*) Partners in misery, huh?

LITTLE MAN: A large man?

SC. 1] *THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE*

LANDLADY: Tremendous! But when the disease germ struck him, it chopped him down like a piece of rotten timber . . . Statistics show that married men live longest. I'll tell you why it is. (*She straightens her blouse and adjusts the belt.*) Men that—live by themselves—get peculiar ways. All that part of their lives that was meant to be taken up with family matters is all left over—empty. You get what I mean?

LITTLE MAN: Yeah?

LANDLADY: Well . . . They fill in with make-shift things. I once had a roomer who went to the movies every night of the week. He carried a brief-case with him all of the time. Guess what he carried in it!

LITTLE MAN: What?

LANDLADY: Sanitary paper toilet-seats. (*The LITTLE MAN looks away in embarrassment.*) A crank about sanitation. Another I had, had a pair of pet bedroom slippers.

LITTLE MAN: Pet—bedroom——?

LANDLADY: Slippers. Plain grey felt, nothing the least bit picturesque about them. Only one thing—the odour! Highly objectionable, after fifteen years—the length of time I reckon he must 've worn 'em! Well—the slippers disappeared—accidentally on purpose, as they say! Heavens on earth! How did I know he would die of a broken heart? He practically did! (*She laughs.*) Life was incomplete without those bedroom slippers (*She turns back to the walls.*) Some day I'm going to take me a wire scrubbing-brush an' a bar of Fels-Naphtha an' leave them walls as clean as they was before the first roomer moved in. (*The door is pushed open. The OLD MAN enters. He looks like Walt Whitman.*)

OLD MAN: You mustn't do that, daughter.

LANDLADY: Aw. You. Why mustn't I?

OLD MAN: These signatures are their little claims of remembrance. Their modest bids for immortality, daughter. Don't brush them away. Even a sparrow—leaves an empty nest for a souvenir. Isn't that so, young man?

LITTLE MAN: Yes.

OLD MAN: Cataracts have begun to—— (*He waves his hand in front of his nearly sightless eyes.*) I'm not sure where you are.

LITTLE MAN (*stretching out his hand*): Here.

THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE [SC. I

OLD MAN: Be comforted here. For the little while you stay. And write your name on the wall! You won't be forgotten.

LANDLADY: That's enough, now, Father.

OLD MAN: I'm only looking for some empty bottles. Have you any empty bottles?

LANDLADY: How would he have empty bottles? He just moved in.

OLD MAN: I trade them in at the Bright Spot Delicatessen. I'll drop in later to finish our conversation. (*He goes out.*)

LANDLADY: My father-in-law. Don't encourage him, he'll be a nuisance to you. (*She taps her forehead.*) Alcoholic—gone!

LITTLE MAN (*sinking down on the bed and lifting the cat again.*) I'm—tired.

LANDLADY: I hope you'll be comfortable here. I guess that's all.

LITTLE MAN: Oliver Woodson?

LANDLADY (*at the door*): Oh, yes—Oliver Woodson. (*She goes out. The LITTLE MAN rises and removes a stub of pencil from his pocket. Smiling a little, he goes to the wall and beneath the large and elliptical self-portrait of the Russian, he draws his own lean figure, in a few quick pencil scratches. Beneath the cat's picture, he puts an emphatic check-mark. Then he smiles at the cat and stands aside to survey.*)

CURTAIN

SCENE II

It is late one night that winter. The furnished room is empty except for the cat. Through the frosted panes of the window in the left wall a steely winter moonlight enters. The window in the right wall admits the flickering ruddy glow of the plant and its pulse-like throbbing is heard faintly. The LITTLE MAN enters and switches on the suspended electric globe. He carries a small package. He smiles at Nitchevo and unwraps the package. It is a small bottle of cream which he brandishes before her.

LITTLE MAN: Just a minute. (*He lowers the window shade that faces the plant.*) Now. We forget the plant. (*He pours the cream in a blue saucer.*) There. Supper. (*He sets it on the floor by the bed and sits to watch her eat.*) Nitchevo, don't be nervous. There's nothing to

SC. II] *THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE*

worry about. In winter my hands get stiff, it makes me clumsy. But I can rub them together, I can massage the joints. And when the weather turns warmer—the stiffness will pass away. Then I won't jam up the machine any more. Today Mr. Woodson got mad. He bawled me out. Because my clumsy fingers jammed the machine. He stood behind me and watched me and grunted—like this! (*He utters an ominous grunt.*) Oh, it was like a knife stuck in me, between my ribs! Because, you see, I . . . have to *keep* this job, to provide the supper. Well . . . I began to shake! Like this! (*He imitates shaking.*) And he kept standing behind me, watching and grunting. My hands went faster and faster, they broke the rhythm. All of a sudden a part was put out of place, the machine was jammed, the belt conveyor stopped! SCR-E-E-ECH! Every man along the line looked at me! Up and down and all along the line they turned and stared—at me! Mr. Woodson grabbed me by the shoulder! "There you go," he said, "you clumsy Dago! Jammed up the works again, you brainless Spick!" (*He covers his face.*) Oh, Nitchewo—I lost my dignity—I cried. . . . (*He draws his breath in a shuddering sob.*) But now we forget about that, that's over and done! It's night, we're alone together—the room is warm—we sleep. . . . (*He strips off his shirt and lies back on the bed. There is a knock at the door and he sits up quickly. He makes a warning gesture to the cat. But the caller is not to be easily discouraged. The knock is repeated, the door is thrust open. It is the LANDLADY in a soiled but fancy negligee.*)

LANDLADY (*resentfully but coyly*): Oh—you were playing possum.

LITTLE MAN: I'm—not dressed.

LANDLADY: Nobody needs to be bashful on my account. I thought you'd gone out and left on the light in your room. We got to economize on electric current.

LITTLE MAN: I always turn it off when I go out.

LANDLADY: I don't believe you ever go out, except to the plant.

LITTLE MAN: I'm on the night-shift now.

LANDLADY: The grave-yard shift, they call it. What is the trouble with you and Oliver Woodson?

LITTLE MAN: Trouble? Why?

LANDLADY: I met him in the Bright Spot Delicatessen. "Oh, by

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way," I said to him, "how's that feller I sent you getting along, that Eyetalian feller?" "Aw, him!" said Mr. Woodson. "Say, what's the matter with him? Isn't he doing okay?" "Naw, he jams things up!" "Well," I said, "give him time, I think he's nervous. Maybe he tries too hard."

LITTLE MAN: What did he say?

LANDLADY: He grunted. (*She smiles. The LITTLE MAN pours the rest of the cream in the cat's saucer. He is trembling.*) You must try an' get over being so nervous. Maybe what you need is more amusement. (*She sits on the edge of the bed, with the balalaika.*) Sit back down! There's room for two on this sofa! (*She pats the space beside her. He gingerly sits back down at a considerable distance. His hands knot anxiously together. She plays a soft chord on the balalaika and bums with a sidelong glance at the nervous roomer.*) Tired?

LITTLE MAN: Yes.

LANDLADY: Some nights I hear you—talking through the door. Who is he talking to, I used to wonder. (*She chuckles.*) At first I imagined you had a woman in here. Well, I'm a tolerant woman. I know what people need is more than food and more than work at the plant. (*She plays dreamily for a moment.*) So when I heard that talking I was pleased. I said to myself—"That lonely little man has found a woman!" I only hoped it wasn't one picked up—you know—on the street. Women like that aren't likely to be very clean. Female hygiene's a lot more—complicated. Well . . . (*The LITTLE MAN looks down in an agony of embarrassment.*)

LITTLE MAN: It wasn't—a woman.

LANDLADY: I know. I found that out. Just you. Carrying on a one-sided conversation with a cat! Funny, yes—but kind of pitiful, too. You a man not even middle-aged yet—devoting all that care and time and affection—on what? A stray alley-cat you inherited just by chance from the man who stayed here before you, that fool of a Russian! The strangest kind of a romance . . . a man—and a cat! What we mustn't do, is disregard nature. Nature says—"Man take woman or—man be lonesome!" (*She smiles at him coyly and moves a little closer.*) Nature has certainly never said, "Man take cat!"

LITTLE MAN (*suddenly, awkwardly rising*): Nature has never said anything to me.

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LANDLADY (*impatiently*): Because you wouldn't listen!

LITTLE MAN: Oh, I listened. But all I ever heard was my own voice—asking me troublesome questions!

LANDLADY: You hear *me*, don't you?

LITTLE MAN: I hear you singing when I come home sometimes. That's very good, I like it.

LANDLADY: Then why don't you stop in the parlour and have a chat? Why do you act so bashful? (*She rises and stands back of him.*) We could talk—have fun! When you took this room you gave me a false impression.

LITTLE MAN: What do you mean?

LANDLADY: Have you forgotten the conversation we had?

LITTLE MAN: I don't remember any conversation.

LANDLADY: You said you wanted to do just like the Russian.

LITTLE MAN: I meant about the cat, to have her with me!

LANDLADY: I told you he also helped about the house!

LITTLE MAN: I'm on the night-shift now!

LANDLADY: Quit dodging the issue! (*There is a pause and then she touches his shoulder.*) I thought I explained things to you. My husband's a chronic invalid, cocaine, now, twice a day! Naturally I have—lots of steam to blow off! (*The LITTLE MAN moves nervously away. She follows ponderously, reaching above her to switch off the electric globe.*) Now—that's better, ain't it?

LITTLE MAN: I don't think I know—exactly.

LANDLADY: You ain't satisfied with the room?

LITTLE MAN: I like the room.

LANDLADY: I had the idea you wasn't satisfied with it.

LITTLE MAN: The room is home. I like it.

LANDLADY: The way you avoided having a conversation—almost ran past the front room every night. Why don't we talk together? The cat's got your tongue?

LITTLE MAN: You wouldn't be talking—to me.

LANDLADY: I'm talking to you—directly!

LITTLE MAN: Not to *me*.

LANDLADY: You! Me! Where is any third party?

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LITTLE MAN: There isn't a second party.

LANDLADY: What?

LITTLE MAN: You're only talking to something you think is me.

LANDLADY: Now we *are* getting in deep.

LITTLE MAN: You made me say it. (*turning to face her.*) I'm not like you, a solid, touchable being.

LANDLADY: Words—wonderfull! The cat's let go of your tongue?

LITTLE MAN: You're wrong if you think I'm—a person! I'm not —no person! At all . . .

LANDLADY: What are you, then, little man?

LITTLE MAN (*sighing and shugging*): A kind of a—ghost of a—man . . .

LANDLADY (*laughing*): So you're not Napoleon, you're Napoleon's ghost!

LITTLE MAN: When a body^o is born in the world—it can't back out. . . .

LANDLADY: Huh?

LITTLE MAN: But sometimes—

LANDLADY: What?

LITTLE MAN (*with a bewildered gesture*): The body is only—a shell. It may be alive—when what's inside—is too afraid to come out! It stays locked up and alone! Single! Private! That's how it is—with me. You're not talking to me—but just what you *think* is me!

LANDLADY (*laughing gently*): Such a lot of words. You've thrown me the dictionary. All you needed to say was that you're lonesome. (*She touched his shoulder.*) Plain old lonesomeness, that's what's the matter with you! (*He turns to her and she gently touches his face.*) Nature says, "Don't be lonesome!" (*The curtain begins to fall.*) Nature says—"Don't—be lonesome!"

CURTAIN

SCENE III

It is again late at night. The LITTLE MAN enters with snow on his turned-up collar and knitted black wool cap.

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He carries the usual little package of cream for his friend the cat. Again he follows his nightly routine of lowering the shade on the glare of the plant, pouring the cream in the blue saucer, and the sighing relaxation on the bed.

LITTLE MAN: Nitchivo—don't worry—don't be nervous! (*A needless admonition for Nitchivo doesn't have a care in the world. The LITTLE MAN, smiling, watches her as he half-reclines on the bed.*) As long as we stick together there's nothing to fear. There's only danger when two who belong to each other get separated. We won't get separated—never! Will we? (*There is a rap at the door.*) Bella? (*The door is pushed open and the OLD MAN steps inside.*)

OLD MAN: May I come in? (*The LITTLE MAN nods.*) Don't mention this visit to my daughter-in-law. She doesn't approve of my having social relations with her roomers. Where is a chair?

LITTLE MAN (*shoving one towards him*): Here.

OLD MAN: Thank you. I won't stay long.

LITTLE MAN: You may stay as long as you wish.

OLD MAN: That's very generous of you. But I won't do it. I know how tiresome I am, a tiresome old man who makes his need of companionship a nuisance. I don't suppose you—have a little tobacco?

LITTLE MAN (*producing some*): Yes—here. Shall I roll it for you?

OLD MAN: Oh, no, no, no. I have a wonderful lightness in my fingers!

LITTLE MAN: Mine shake, they're always clumsy.

OLD MAN: Yes. I understand that. So I—dropped in. I thought we would have a talk.

LITTLE MAN (*embarrassed*): I don't—talk much.

OLD MAN: Fools hate silence. I like it. I see you have books. From the public library?

LITTLE MAN: One or two. I own them.

OLD MAN: As I was passing outside, I heard some clinking.

LITTLE MAN: Clinking?

OLD MAN: Yes—like bottles. I collect empty bottles which I exchange at the Bright Spot Delicatessen.

LITTLE MAN: The bottle you heard was only a little cream bottle. It's under the bed.

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OLD MAN: Oh. That wouldn't do any good. You drink cream?

LITTLE MAN: The cat.

OLD MAN (*nodding*): Ohhh, so the cat is present! That's what made the air in the room so soft and full of sweetness! Nitchevo—where are you?

LITTLE MAN: She's having her supper.

OLD MAN: Well, I won't disturb her until she's finished. You are devoted to animals?

LITTLE MAN: To Nitchevo.

OLD MAN: Be careful.

LITTLE MAN: Of what?

OLD MAN: You may *lose* her. That's the trouble with love, the chance of loss.

LITTLE MAN: Nitchevo wouldn't leave me.

OLD MAN: Not on purpose, maybe. But life is full of accidents, chances, possibilities—not all of which are always very good ones. Do you know that?

LITTLE MAN: Yes.

OLD MAN: A truck might run her down.

LITTLE MAN: Nitchevo was brought up on the street.

OLD MAN: The luxuries of her present existence may have dulled her faculties a little.

LITTLE MAN: You don't understand Nitchevo. She hasn't forgotten how dangerous life can be for a lonely person.

OLD MAN: But she hasn't control of the universe in her hands!

LITTLE MAN: No. Why should she?

OLD MAN: Other things might happen. You work at the plant?

LITTLE MAN: Yes.

OLD MAN (*a fanatical light coming into his clouded eyes*): Uh-huh! I know those fellows that operate the plant, I know the bosses. They *know* I know them, too. They know I know their tricks. That's why they hate me. Look. Suppose the demand for what they make slacked off. There's two things they could do. They could cut down on the price and so put the product within the purchasing power of more consumers. Listen! I've read books on

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the subject! But, no! There's another thing they could do. They could cut down on the number of things they make—create a scarcity! See? And "boost the price still higher! And so maintain the rich man's margin of profit! Which do you think they'd do? Why, God Almighty—Nitchévo knows the answer! They'd do what they've always done. (*He chuckles and rises and begins to sing in a hoarse cracked voice.*)

Hold up, hold up the Profit,
Ye Minions of the Boss!
Lift high the Royal Profit,
It must not suffer loss!

(*There is a pounding on the wall and vocal objection outside.*)

LITTLE MAN: Mrs. O'Fallon—disturbed.

OLD MAN: Yes, yes! What they'll cut down is production. Less and less men will be needed to run the machines. Fewer and fewer will stand at the belt conveyor. More and more workers will fall into the hands of the social agencies. Independence goes—then pride—then hope. Finally even the ability of the heart to feel shame or despair or anything at all—goes, too. What's left? A creature like me. Whose need of companionship has become a nuisance to people. Well, somewhere along the line of misadventures—is the cat!

LITTLE MAN: Nitchévo?

OLD MAN (*nodding sagaciously*): You are not able to buy the cream any more.

LITTLE MAN: Well?

OLD MAN: Well, cats are *capricious*!

LITTLE MAN: She isn't a fair-weather friend.

OLD MAN: You think she'd be faithful to you? In adversity, even?

LITTLE MAN: She'd be faithful to me.

OLD MAN (*beaming slowly*): Good! Good! (*He touches his eyelids.*) A beautiful trust. A rare and beautiful trust. It makes me cry a little. That's all that life has to give in the way of perfection.

LITTLE MAN: What?

OLD MAN: The warm and complete understanding of two or three in a close-walled room with the windows blind to the world.

LITTLE MAN (*nodding*): Yes.

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OLD MAN (*alternatingly tender and vociferous*): The roof is thin. Above it, the huge and glittering wheel of heaven which spells a mystery to us. Fine—invisible—cords of wonder—attach us to it. And so we are saved and purified and exalted. We three! You and me and—Nitchuvo, the cat! (*He lifts her against his ear.*) Listen! She purrs! Mmin, such a soft and sweet and powerful sound it is. It's the soul of the universe—throbbing in her! (*He bands her back to the LITTLE MAN.*) Take her and hold her close! Close! Never let her be separated from you. For while you're together—none of the evil powers on earth can destroy you. Not even the imbecile child which is chance—not the mad, insatiable wolves in the hearts of men! (*The sound of exterior protest gathers volume. A window bangs open and a woman shouts for an officer. The OLD MAN crosses to the window that faces the plant. He raises the blind and the flickering red glare of the pulsing forges shines on his bearded face.*) There she is! LITTLE MAN: The plant?

OLD MAN: Uh-huh. (*In a quiet, conversational tone.*) The day before yesterday I went down to the plant. I asked the Superintendent about a job. "Oliver Woodson," I said, "this corporation's too big for me to fight with. I've come with the olive branch. I want a job." "You're too old," he told me. "Never mind," I said, "take down my name!" "But, Pop," he said to me, "you're nearly blind!" "Never mind," I said, "take down my name!" "Okay, Pop," said Mr. Oliver Woodson. "What's your name?" "My name is Man," I said. "My name is Man. Man is my name," I said, "spelt M-A-N." "Okay," said Oliver Woodson. "Where do you live?" "I live on a cross," I said. "On what?" "On a cross! I live on a cross, on a cross! (*His voice rising louder and louder.*) Cupidity and Stupidity, that is the two-armed cross on which you have nailed me! Stupidity and cupidity, that is the two-armed cross on which you have nailed me!"

LITTLE MAN: What did he say, then? The Superintendent?

OLD MAN: The Superintendent? Said, "Hush up, be still! I'll send for the wagon!"

WOMAN ROOMER (*shouting in the hall outside*): I ain't gonna live in no house with a lunatic! I called the police, he's gonna send for th' wagon!

LITTLE MAN (*sadly*): She's going to send for the wagon.

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OLD MAN: There! You see? I speak for the people. For me, they send for the wagon! Never mind. Take down my name. It's Man! (*He leans out the window and shakes his fist at the plant. The forges blaze bigger and their steady pulse seems to quicken with the OLD MAN's frenzy.*) I see you and I hear you! Boom-boom-boom! The pulse of a diseased heart!

LANDLADY (*in the hall*): Be still, you drunken old fool, you've woke up the house!

WOMAN ROOMER (*outside*): Terrible, terrible, terrible! Lunatics in the house!

OLD MAN: A fire-breathing monster you are! But listen to me! Because I'm going to speak The Malediction! Go on, go on, you niggardly pimps of the world! You entrepreneurs of deception, you traders of lies! We stand at bay but we are not defeated. The passion of our resistance is gathering force. We can Boom-Boom, too, we're going to Boom! It's only a little while we give you licence! We say, Feed on, Feed on! You race of gluttons! Devour the flesh of thy brother, drink his blood! Glut your monstrous bellies on corruption! And when you're too fat to move—that fist will clench, which is the fist of God—to strike! Strike! *STRIKE!* (*He smashes a pane of the window. At this moment the door is burst open. Light spills in from the hall.*)

WOMAN ROOMER (*outside the doorway*): Watch out! He'll kill somebody!

LANDLADY: Mrs. O'Fallon, be still, get out of the way! Officer, go on in! (*A police officer enters, followed by the LANDLADY in a wrapper. A group of frightened roomers, grey and bloodless-looking, huddle behind her in the doorway. The LITTLE MAN stands clutching the cat against his chest. The OLD MAN's rage is spent. He stands with head hanging in the banal glow of the electric bulb which the LANDLADY switches on.*)

LANDLADY (*to the OLD MAN*): Ahh, you drunken old fool, my patience is gone. Officer, take him away. Lock him up till he comes to his senses. (*The officer grasps the OLD MAN's arm.*)

OFFICER: Come along, old man.

WOMAN ROOMER (*in the crowd at the door*): A dangerous, criminal character!

THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE [SC. IV

LANDLADY (*to the group*): Go on, go on back to your beds. The excitement is over. (*The OLD MAN seems barely conscious as he is pushed out the door. The others retreat behind him. The LITTLE MAN makes a dumb, protesting gesture, still clutching Nitchevo against his chest with one arm. The LANDLADY slams the door on the others. She turns angrily to face the LITTLE MAN.*) You! You're responsible for it! Haven't I told you not to encourage him in his drunken ravings? Well! . . . Why don't you say something? (*She jerks the window down.*) Christ. You're not a man at all, you're a poor excuse. Put down that cat! Throw that animal down! (*She snatches Nitchevo from him and casts her to the floor.*) She hates me.

LITTLE MAN: She doesn't like unkindness. (*He stares at her.*)

LANDLADY (*uneasily*): Why that look? What's the meaning of it?

LITTLE MAN: I'm not looking at you. I'm looking at all the evil in the world. Turn out the light. I've lived too long in a room that was nothing but windows and always at noon and with no curtains to draw. Turn out the light. (*She reaches slowly above her and switches it off. He suddenly goes to her and plunges his head against her chest.*) O beautiful, cruel Zigeuner! Sing to me, sing to me! Comfort me in the dark! (*At first she stands stiff and hostile. Then she relents and embraces his crouching body, and begins to sing, softly.*)

CURTAIN

SCENE IV

A morning in spring. The branches outside the windows of the furnished room bear delicate new leaves which cast their trembling shadows through the panes. On the white iron bed is seated the BOXER in his undershirt paring his corns with a penknife. With a faint creaking, the door is pushed open. The LITTLE MAN comes in. His manner is dazed, he looks as though he had had a long illness.

LITTLE MAN (*faintly*): Ni-tchevo?

BOXER (*grinning*): Sorry, you've got the wrong party—my name is Bill! (*He points to a space on the wall where his signature is scrawled in great letters. A great X mark has been drawn through the portraits of the Russian, the Cat, and the LITTLE MAN.*)

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LITTLE MAN: This was—my old room.

BOXER: Well, it ain't any more. Unless the landlady rooked me.

LITTLE MAN: You've—moved in here?

BOXER: Yep. I've hung my boxing gloves on the wall. And there's my silver trophies. (*He points to gloves suspended from a nail and several silver cups on the bureau.*)

LITTLE MAN: There was—a cat.

BOXER: A cat?

LITTLE MAN: Yes.

BOXER: Yours?

LITTLE MAN: Yes. She was mine—by adoption. I thought I might—hoped—find her here.

BOXER (*looking at him with humorous curiosity*): I can't help you out.

LITTLE MAN: You haven't seen one? A grey one? (*He touches his chest.*) White-spotted?

BOXER: Why, I've seen dozens of cats of every description—(*Away in the house somewhere the LANDLADY commences to sing one of her haunting Zigeuner songs. As he speaks the BOXER returns to paring his corns with an amiable expression.*)—I've seen grey ones, black ones, white ones, spitted, spotted, and spatted! My relations with cats is strictly—*laissez faire*! Know what that means, buddy? Live and let live—a motto. I've never gone out of my way—(*looking up reflectively*)—to injure a cat. But when one gets in my way, I usually kick it! (*The LITTLE MAN stares at him speechlessly.*) Any more information I can give you?

LITTLE MAN: You see, I worked at the plant.

BOXER: So?

LITTLE MAN: I was fired, I—couldn't handle the work! My—fingers—froze up on me! On the way home, I—something happened. They took me to the Catholic Sisters of Mercy! (*The BOXER grunts.*) I had no idea how many weeks I was there. Observation—mental. When I got out—I wondered about my cat, and that was only this morning. I've—come to get her.

BOXER: I haven't seen her, buddy.

LITTLE MAN (*desperately*): She hasn't—climbed in the window?

BOXER: No. If she did she wouldn't have got a very cordial reception.

THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE [SC. IV

LITTLE MAN: She hasn't—been *around*, then? (*His voice breaks, his lips tremble. The BOXER stares at him incredulously. Suddenly he begins to laugh. Helplessly the LITTLE MAN laughs with him, breathlessly and uncontrollably. For several moments they laugh together, then all at once the LITTLE MAN's face puckers up. He covers his face and sobs. The BOXER grunts with amazement. This is entirely too much. He strides to the door.*)

BOXER (*souting*): Bella! Bella! Hey, Bella! (*The LANDLADY answers. After a moment or two she appears in the door. Her large simplicity is gone. She has frizzed her hair and has on a tight-fitting dress and flashy jewellery. In her now is a sinister, gleaming richness.*)

LANDLADY: Aw. *YOU*. They tole me you got laid off at th' plant. I'm sorry. The room 'as been taken. It's now occupied by this young gentleman here. Your stuff, your few belongings, are packed in the downstairs closet. On your way out you may as well pick them up. (*The LITTLE MAN claws in his pockets and pulls out a large dirty rag. He blows his nose on it.*) I can't afford to let my rooms stay vacant. I got to be practical, don't I? I didn't take you under false pretences. You must remember the first conversation we had, before you even decided you'd take the room. I told you there wasn't nothing soft in my nature. That I was a character perfectly fair and decent—but not sentimental. It's luck in this world, plain luck—and you've got to buck it!

LITTLE MAN: You—came in, nights and—sang.

BOXER: Huh!

LITTLE MAN (*wonderingly*): Sang. . . .

LANDLADY: What of it? I gave you free entertainment. But that don't mean I was sentimental about you. (*The LITTLE MAN shakes his head.*)

LITTLE MAN: Nothing?

LANDLADY: What?

LITTLE MAN: *Nothing?*

BOXER (*annoyed*): What is this? What's this going on here? Is this my room or is it somebody else's? (*He grabs his gloves from the wall.*) Return me the fin I paid you and I'll move out!

LANDLADY: Just hold your horses a minute!

BOXER: Mine or his?

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LANDLADY: Yours, horse-mouth! Take it easy!

BOXER: Naw, I won't. I don't like this kind of business! I ren a room, I want no crack-pot visitors coming an' cryin' over some—cat's disappearance!

LANDLADY: Easy, for God's sake! Is this a national crisis? Mr.—Chile con carne! Whatever it is! Please go.

LITTLE MAN (*recovering his dignity*): I'm going. I only wanted to ask you. Where is the cat?

LANDLADY (*grandly*): That question I cannot answer. I turned her out.

LITTLE MAN: When?

LANDLADY: I don't remember. Two or three weeks ago, maybe.

LITTLE MAN (*despairingly*): No!

BOXER: Christ.

LITTLE MAN: No, no, no!

LANDLADY (*sing ily, to them both*): Be still! What do you think I am? The nerve a some people . . . Expeck me to play nurse-maid to a sick alley-cat? (*There is a pause.*)

LITTLE MAN: Sick?

LANDLADY: Yes! Whining! Terrific!

LITTLE MAN: What was—the matter with her?

LANDLADY: How should I know? Am I a—*vettinerry*? She cried all night and made an awful disturbance. Yes, like you're making now! I turned her out. And when she come clinking back here, I thrown cold water on her three or four times! Finally, finally, she took no for an answer! That is all I have to say on the subject.

LITTLE MAN (*staring at her*): Mean—ugly—fat! (*He repeats it faster.*) Mean, ugly, fat, mean, ugly, fat! (*She slaps him furiously in the face. The BOXER grabs his shoulders and shoves him out the door with a kick.*)

BOXER: Now, God damn it! A mad-house!

LANDLADY: Ahhh! Th'—

LITTLE MAN: (*screaming through the door*): Where is she? Nitchevo, Nitchevol Where is she? Where did she go? Nitchevo, Nitchevol Where!

LANDLADY (*screaming back at him*): Holy God, what do I care where that dirty cat went! She might've gone to the devil for all

THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE [sc. iv]

I care! Get out of the house and stop screaming! I'll call the police!
(*The LITTLE MAN does not answer and turns away from the door where the BOXER is blocking him.*)

BOXER: Huh! Yes—a mad-house.

LANDLADY: Out of his mind. Completely. (*She wipes her face on her sleeve and adjusts her clothes.*) Going? Can you hear?

BOXER: Yeah. Going back downstairs.

LANDLADY: God. I hate for people to make a scene like that. Imagine! Holding me responsible for a sick cat. (*She sniffles a little.*) Mean, ugly, fat. . . . I guess I am. But who isn't? (*She sinks exhaustedly on the bed. The BOXER stands at the window rolling a cigarette.*)

BOXER: He's gone out back of the house.

LANDLADY: What's he doing back there?

BOXER: Poking around in the alley and calling the cat. (*The LITTLE MAN calls in the distance: "Nitchevol!"*)

LANDLADY: Useless. He'll never find her. (*There is a sudden burst of joyful shouting. The BOXER leans out the window and chuckles. A softer, warmer quality appears in the slanting sunlight. There is distant music.*) Now what's going on?

BOXER: A celebration.

LANDLADY: Celebration of what?

BOXER (*lighting his cigarette and resting a foot on the sill*): The old crack-pot with the whiskers has found the cat.

LANDLADY: Found her? Who did you say?

BOXER: The old man, your father-in-law.

LANDLADY: The old man couldn't have found her! (*She gets up languidly and moves to the window.*) How could he have found her? The old man's blind.

BOXER: Anyhow, he found her. And there they go. (*The LANDLADY gazes wonderingly out the window. The BOXER slips his arm about her waist. The light is golden, the music is faint and tender.*)

LANDLADY: Well, well, well. And so they are leaving together. The funniest pair of lovers! The ghost of a man—and a cat named Nitchevol! I'm glad. . . . Goodbye! (*The music sounds louder and triumphant.*)

CURTAIN

The Long Goodbye

C H A R A C T E R S

JOE

MYRA

MOTHER

SILVA

BILL

FOUR MOVERS

.

The Long Goodbye

SCENE: *Apartment F, third floor south, in a tenement apartment situated in the washed-out middle of a large mid-western American city. Outside the trucks rumble on dull streets and children cry out at their games in the area-ways between walls of dusty tomato-coloured brick. Through the double front windows in the left wall, late afternoon sunlight streams into the shabby room. Beyond the windows is the door to the stair hall, and in the centre of the back wall a large door opening on a corridor in the apartment where a telephone stand is located. A door in the right wall leads to a bedroom. The furnishings are disbevelled and old as if they had witnessed the sudden withdrawal of twenty-five years of furious, desperate living among them and now awaited only the moving men to cart them away. From the apartment next door comes the sound of a radio broadcasting the baseball game from Sportman's Park. JOE, a young man of twenty-three, is sitting at a table by the double windows, brooding over a manuscript. In front of him is a portable typewriter with a page of the manuscript in it, and on the floor beside the table is a shabby valise. JOE wears an undershirt and wash-pants. The noise of the broadcast game annoys him and he slams down the windows, but the sound is as loud as ever. He raises them and goes out the door on the right and slams other windows. The shouting of the radio subsides and JOE comes back in lighting a cigarette, a desperate scowl on his face. SILVA, an Italian youth, small, graceful and good-natured, opens the entrance door and comes in. He is about JOE's age. By way of greeting he grins and then takes off his shirt.*

JOE: Radios, baseball games! That's why I write nothing but crap!

SILVA: Still at it?

JOE: All night and all day.

SILVA: How come?

JOE: I had a wild hair. Couldn't sleep.

SILVA (*glancing at page in machine*): You're burning the candle

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at both ends, Kid . . . (*He moves from the table across the room.*) And in my humble opinion the light ain't worth it. I thought cha was moving today.

JOE: I am. (*He flops in table-chair and bangs out a line. Then he removes the sheet.*) Phone the movers. They oughta been here.

SILVA: Yeh? Which one?

JOE: Langan's Storage.

SILVA: Storin' this stuff?

JOE: Yeh.

SILVA: What for? Why don't you sell it?

JOE: For six bits to the junk man?

SILVA: Store it you gotta pay storage. Sell it you got a spot a cash to start on.

JOE: Start on what?

SILVA: Whatever you're going to start on

JOE: I got a spot a cash Mother's insurance I split it with Myra, we both got a hundred and fifty. Know where I'm going?

SILVA: No. Where?

JOE: Rio. Or Buenos Aires. I took Spanish in high school.

SILVA: So what?

JOE: I know the language. I oughta get on okay.

SILVA: Working for Standard Oil?

JOE: Maybe. Why not? Call the movers.

SILVA (*going to the phone*): You better stay here. Take your money outa the bank and go on the Project.

JOE: No. I'm not gonna stay here. All of this here is dead for me. The goldfish is dead. I forgot to feed it.

SILVA (*into the phone*): Lindell 0124. . . . Langan's Storage? This is the Bassett apartment. Why ain't the movers come yet? . . . Aw! (*He bangs up the receiver.*) The truck's on the way. June is a big moving month. I guess they're kept busy.

JOE: I shouldn't have left the bowl setting right here in the sun. It probably cooked the poor bastard.

SILVA: He stinks. (*SILVA picks up the bowl.*)

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JOE: What uh you do with him?

SILVA: Dump 'im into the tawlut.

JOE: The tawlut's turned off.

SILVA: Oh, well. (*He goes out the bedroom door.*)

JOE: Why is it that Jesus makes a distinction between the goldfish an' the sparrow! (*He laughs.*) There is no respect for dead bodies.

SILVA (*coming back in*): You are losing your social consciousness, Joe. You should say "unless they are rich!" I read about once where a millionaire buried his dead canary in a small golden casket studded with genuine diamonds. I think it presents a beautiful picture. The saffron feathers on the white satin and the millionaire's tears falling like diamonds in sunlight—maybe a boy's choir singing! Like death in the movies. Which is always a beautiful thing. Even for an artist I'd say that your hair was too long. A little hip and you'd pass for a female Imp. Cigarette?

JOE: Thanks. Christ!

SILVA: What's the matter?

JOE: How does this stuff smell to you? (*He gives him a page of the manuscript.*)

SILVA: Hmm. I detect a slight odour of frying bacon.

JOE: Lousy?

SILVA: Well, it's not you at your best. You'd better get on the Project. We're through with the city guide.

JOE: What are you going to write next?

SILVA: God Bless Harry L. Hopkins 999 times. Naw . . . I got a creative assignment. I'm calling it "Ghosts in the Old Courthouse." Days when the slaves were sold there! . . . This is bad. This speech of the girl's—"I want to get you inside of my body—not just for the time that it takes to make love on a bed between the rattle of ice in the last highball and the rattle the milk-wagons make——"

JOE (*tearing the page from his hands*): I must've been nuts.

SILVA: You must've had hot britches!

JOE: I did. Summer and celibacy aren't a very good mix. Buenos Aires. . . .

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1ST MOVER (*from the ball outside*): Langan's Storage!

JOE (*going to the door*): Right here. (*He opens the door and the four burly MOVERS crowd in, sweating, shuffling, looking about with quick, casual eyes.*) Take out the back stuff first, will yuh, boys?

1ST MOVER: Sure.

SILVA: Hot work, huh?

2ND MOVER: Plenty.

3RD MOVER (*walking in hastily*): "I got a pocketful of dreams!" What time's it, kid?

JOE: Four-thirty-five.

3RD MOVER: We oughta get time an' a ha'f w'en we finish this job. How'd the ball game come out?

JOE: Dunno. (*He watches them, troubled.*)

2ND MOVER: What's it to you, Short Horn? Get busy! (*They laugh and go out the rear corridor. Later they are heard knocking down a bed.*)

SILVA (*noting JOE's gloom*): Let's get out of this place. It's depressing.

JOE: I got to look out for the stuff.

SILVA: Come, on get a beer. There's a twenty-six-ounce-a-dime joint open up on Laclede.

JOE: Wait a while, Silva.

SILVA: Okay. (*The MOVERS come through with parts of a bed. Joe watches them, motionless, face set.*)

JOE: That is the bed I was born on.

SILVA: Jeez! And look how they handle it—just like it was an ordinary bed!

JOE: Myra was born on that bed, too. (*The MOVERS go out the door.*) Mother died on it.

SILVA: Yeah? She went pretty quick for cancer. Most of 'em hang on longer an' suffer a hell of a lot.

JOE: She killed herself. I found the empty bottle that morn'ing in a waste-basket. It wasn't the pain, it was the doctor an' hospital bills that she was scared of. She wanted us to have the insurance.

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SILVA: I didn't know that.

JOE: Naw. We kept it a secret—she an' me an' the doctor. Myra never found out.

SILVA: Where is Myra now?

JOE: Last I heard, in Detroit. I got a card from her. Here.

SILVA: Picture of the Yacht Club. What's she doin'—yachting?

JOE (*gruffly*): Naw, I dunno what she's doin'. How should I know?

SILVA: She don't say? (*JOE doesn't answer.*) She was a real sweet kid—till all of a sudden she——

JOE: Yeh. Ev'rything broke up—when Mom died.

SILVA (*picking up a magazine*): Four bit magazines! No wonder you stick up your nose at the Project Hemingway! You know he's got a smooth style. (*JOE stands as if entranced as the MOVERS pass through to the rear.*) He's been with the Loyalist forces in Spain. Fighting in front-line trenches, they say. And yet some a the critics say that he wears a toupee on his chest! Reactionaries! (*SILVA begins to read. MYRA comes quietly into the room—young, radiant, vibrant with the glamour that memory gives.*)

JOE: You got a date tonight, Myra?

MYRA: Uh-huh.

JOE: Who with?

MYRA: Bill.

JOE: Who's Bill?

MYRA: Fellow I met at the swimming meet out at Bellerive Country Club.

JOE: I don't think a swimming pool's the best place in the world to pick up your boy-friends, Myra.

MYRA: Sure it is. If you look good in a Jantzen. (*She slips off her kimono.*) Get my white summer formal. No, I better. You got sweaty hands. (*She goes out the bedroom door.*)

JOE: What happened to Dave and Hugh White and that—that K. City boy?

MYRA: (*coming back with a white evening dress on*): Who? Them? My God, I don't know. Here. Hook this for me.

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JOE: I guess what you've got in your heart's a revolving door.

MYRA: You know it. The radio's a great institution, huh, Joe? (*Rapidly brushing her hair.*) I get so tired of it. Pop's got it on all the time. He gripes my soul. Just setting there, setting there, setting there! Never says nothing no more.

JOE: You oughta watch your English. It's awful.

MYRA: Hell, I'm not a book-worm. How's it look?

JOE: Smooth. Where you going?

MYRA: Chase Roof. Bill is no piker. His folks have got lotsa mazooma. They live 'out in Huntleigh—offa Ladue. Christ, it's—whew! Open that window! Cloudy?

JOE: No. Clear as a bell.

MYRA: That's good. Dancing under the stars! (*The doorbell rings.*) That's him. Get the door. (*JOE faces the door as BILL enters.*)

JOE: Why go to Switzerland, huh?

BILL: What? (*He laughs indifferently*) Oh, yeah. She ready?

JOE: Sit down. She'll be right out.

BILL: Good.

JOE (*sweeping papers off the sofa*): You see we read the papers. Keep up with events of the day. Sport sheet?

BILL: No, thanks.

JOE: The Cards won a double-header. Joe Medwick hit a home-run with two men on in the second. Comics?

BILL: No, thanks. I've seen the papers.

JOE: Oh. I thought you might've missed 'em because it's so early.

BILL: It's eight-forty-five.

JOE: It's funny, isn't it?

BILL: What?

JOE: The chandelier. I thought you were looking at it.

BILL: I hadn't noticed—particularly.

JOE: It always reminds me a little of mushroom soup. (*BILL regards him without amusement.*) Myra says that you live in Huntleigh Village.

BILL: Yes?

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JOE: It must be very nice out there. In summer.

BILL: We like it. (*He stands up.*) Say, could you give your little sister a third-alarm—or whatever it takes?

JOE: She'll be out when she's ready.

BILL: That's what I'm afraid of.

JOE: Is this your first date, Bill?

BILL: How do you mean?

JOE: In my experience girls don't always pop right out of their boudoirs the minute a guy calls for 'em.

BILL: No? But you sort of expect more speed of a swimming champ. (*Calling.*) Hey! Myra!

MYRA (*she faces the wall as though it were a mirror*): Yeh, Bill, I'm coining right out!

JOE: Excuse me, will you?

BILL: Oh, yes. (*He faces MYRA.*)

JOE: This Bill of yours is a son-of-a-bitch. If I'd stayed in the room with him another minute I'd have busted him one.

MYRA: Then you'd better stay out. 'Cause I like him. What're you doing tonight, Joe?

JOE: Stay home and write.

MYRA: You stay home and write too much. Broke? Here's a dollar. Get you a date with that girl who writes poetry. Doris. She oughta bat out a pretty good sonnet under the proper influences. Oh, hell—I'm not gonna wear any stockings. Coming, Bill! Look! How is the back of my neck? Is it filthy? Christ! (*She sprays herself with perfume.*) You gotta bathe three times a day to keep fresh in this weather. Doris. Is that her name? I bet that she could be had without too much effort!

JOE: Myra. Don't talk that way.

MYRA: You kill me!

JOE: Naw, it doesn't sound right in a kid your age.

MYRA: I'm twice your age! G'bye, Joe!

JOE: G'bye, Myra.

MYRA (*she faces BILL with a dazzling smile*): Hello, darling!

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BILL: Hi. Let's get outa this sweat-box.

MYRA: Yeah. (*They go out. The MOVERS come in with a dresser.*)

1ST MOVER: Easy.

2ND MOVER: Got it?

1ST MOVER: Yep. Who the f—— closed that door?

JOE: I'll get it. Careful down those stairs.

SILVA (*glancing up from the magazine*): A broken mirror is seven years' bad luck.

JOE: Aw. Is that right? The stork must've dropped us through a whole bunch of 'em when we were born. How's the story?

SILVA: It's good strong stuff.

JOE (*glancing at the title*): Butterfly and the Tank. I read that one.

CHILD (*from the street below*): Fly, Sheepie, fly! Fly, Sheepie, fly!

JOE (*reflectively*): Fly, Sheepie, fly! You ever played that game?

SILVA: Naw. Kids that play games are sissies in our neighbourhood.

JOE: We played it. Myra an' me. Up and down fire-escapes, in an' out basements. . . Jeez! We had a swell time. What happens to kids when they grow up?

SILVA: They grow up. (*He turns a page.*)

JOE: Yeh, they grow up. (*The sound of roller-skates on the sidewalk rises in the silence, as the light fades. Only the door to the bedroom on the right is clear in a spotlight.*)

MOTHER (*softly from the bedroom*). Joe? Oh, Joe!

JOE: Yes, Mother? (*MOTHER appears in the door—a worn, little woman in a dingy wrapper with an expression that is personally troubled and confused.*)

MOTHER: Joe, aren't you going to bed?

JOE: Yes. In a minute.

MOTHER: I think you've written enough tonight, Joe.

JOE: I'm nearly finished. I just wanta finish this sentence.

MOTHER: Myra's still out.

JOE: She went to the Chase Roof.

MOTHER: Couldn't you go along with her sometimes? meet the boys that she goes out with?

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JOE: No, I can't horn in on her dates. Hell, if I had a job I couldn't pay tips for that crowd!

MOTHER: I'm worried about her.

JOE: What for? She says she's older than I am, Mom, an' I guess she's right.

MOTHER: No, she's only a baby. You talk to her, Joe.

JOE: Okay.

MOTHER: I regret that she took that job now, Joe. She should've stayed on at high-school.

JOE: She wanted things—money, clothes—you can't blame her. 'S Dad out?

MOTHER: Yes. . . . She's given up her swimming.

JOE: She got kicked off the Lorelei team.

MOTHER: What for, Joe?

JOE: She broke training rules all the time. Hell, I can't stop her.

MOTHER: She listens to you

JOE: Not much.

MOTHER: Joe——

JOE: Yes?

MOTHER: Joe, it's come back on me, Joe.

JOE (*facing her slowly*): What?

MOTHER: The operation wasn't no use. And all it cost us, Joe, the bills not paid for it yet!

JOE: Mother—what makes you think so?

MOTHER: The same pain's started again.

JOE: How long?

MOTHER: Oh, some time now.

JOE: Why didn't you——?

MOTHER: Joe . . . what's the use?

JOE: Maybe it's—not what you think! You've got to go back. For examination, Mom!

MOTHER: No. This is the way I look at it, Joe. Like this. I've never liked being cramped. I've always wanted to have space around me, plenty of space, to live in the country on the top of a

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hill. I was born in the country, raised there, and I've hankered after it lots in the last few years.

JOE: Yes. I know. (*Now he speaks to himself.*) Those Sunday afternoon rides in the country, the late yellow sun through an orchard, the twisted shadows, the crazy old wind-beaten house, vacant, lop-sided, and you pointing at it, leaning out of the car, trying to make Dad stop——

MOTHER: Look! That house, it's for sale! It oughta go cheap! Twenty acres of apple, a hen-house, and look, a nice barn! It's run-down now but it wouldn't cost much to repair! Stop, Floyd, go slow along here!

JOE: But he went by fast, wouldn't look, wouldn't listen! The snake-fence darted away from the road and a wall of stone rose and the sun disappeared for a moment. Your face was dark, your face looked desperate, Mother, as though you were starving for something you'd seen and almost caught in your hands—but not quite. And then the car stopped in front of a road-side stand. "We need eggs." A quarter, a dime—you borrowed a nickel from Dad. And the sun was low then, slanting across winter fields, and the air was cold. . . .

MOTHER: Some people think about death as being laid down in a box under earth. But I don't. To me it's the opposite, Joe, it's being let out of a box. And going upwards, not down. I don't take stock in heaven, I never did. But I do feel like there's lots of room out there and you don't have to pay rent on the first of each month to any old tight-fisted Dutchman who kicks about how much water you're using. There's freedom, Joe, and freedom's the big thing in life. It's funny that some of us don't ever get it until we're dead. But that's how it is and so we've got to accept it. The hard thing to me is leaving things not straightened out. I'd like to have some assurance, some definite knowledge of what you were going to do, of how things'll work out for you. . . . Joe!

JOE: Yes?

MOTHER: What would you do with three hundred dollars?

JOE: I'm not going to think about that.

MOTHER: I want you to, Joe. The policy's in your name. It's in

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the right hand drawer of the chiffonier, folded up under the handkerchief box and it's got . . . (*Her voice fades out and two of the MOVERS come in carrying a floor-lamp.*)

JOE (*clearing his throat*): 'Where's the shade to that lamp? (*MOTHER slips quietly out as the sunlight brightens.*)

1ST MOVER: It's comin'. (*He knocks the lamp slightly against the wall.*)

JOE: God damn you! Why don't you look what you're doing?

2ND MOVER: What's eating you?

1ST MOVER: Lissen, buddy——

JOE: You don't care about people's things! Any old way is all right!

SILVA (*looking up from the magazine*): Joe, take it easy. They're not going to damage this stuff.

JOE: They're not going to damage it—no!

1ST MOVER: Damage it? S—! (*The two MOVERS laugh as they go out.*)

SILVA: If they break a thing you collect on it.

3RD MOVER (*entering with some cardboard boxes*): What's in these here boxes?

JOE: China. Glass things. So don't go tossing em' around like——

SILVA: Joe, let's get outa this place. I can't concentrate on a story with all this commotion. What uh yuh stayin' here for anyhow, screwball? It's only—makin' yuh feel—depressed, ain't it?

JOE: You go on if you want. I've got to wait here.

4TH MOVER (*coming in with a handful of bottles*): Some empty powder an' perfume bottles offa that dresser—you want 'em or not?

JOE: Leave 'em here on the floor. (*The 4TH MOVER takes up a chair from the room and goes out the door to the stairhall. JOE examines the articles on the floor. He removes the stopper from a perfume bottle and sniffs. The light in the room dims again and the front door is caught in a spotlight. MYRA'S voice can be heard in the hall outside.*)

MYRA: Bill, I had a swell time.

BILL: Zat all? . . . It's dark. They're all in bed. (*JOE rises and straightens attentively.*)

MYRA (*appearing in the doorway*): Joe's lights still on.

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BILL: I'll be quiet, honey. We don't have to make any noise. I'm a *wee* little mouthie!

MYRA (*kissing him*): Yes, and you've got to go home.

BILL: C'mere closer. Unh!

MYRA: Bill!

BILL: Whatsamatter? Aren't you the little free-style swimming an' fancy diving champion of St. Louis?

MYRA: What if I am?

BILL: Well, I can do a swell breast-stroke, too—outa water.

MYRA: Shut up. I want to go to bed.

BILL: So do I.

MYRA: Goodnight.

BILL: Lissen!

MYRA: What?

BILL: I go out with debutantes.

MYRA: What of it?

BILL: Nothing. Except that . .

MYRA: How should I take that remark?

BILL: Okay, I'll tell you. I'll take "Goodnight I've had a swell time" from the V.P. Queen! But when girls like you try to sell me that stuff—

JOE (*stepping into the spotlight area*): Get out!

BILL: Aw. It's big brother. I thought you'd be out on the milk-route by now.

JOE: Get out, you stinking—

MYRA: Joe!

JOE: Before I hang one on you! (*BILL laughs weakly and goes out.*)

MYRA: You were right about him. He's no good. (*JOE looks at her.*) Joe, what do they mean by—'girls like me'?

JOE (*bending slowly and removing a small object from the floor*): I guess they mean—this.

MYRA (*without looking*): What?

JOE: Something he—dropped from his pcket.

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MYRA (*dully*):^{*} Oh. (*Raising her voice.*) Joe, I don't want you to think I——

JOE: Shut up. . . . Mother's sick.

MYRA (*excitedly*): Oh, I know, I know, it's all a rotten dirty mess! The Chase Roof, dancing under the stars! . . . And then on the way home, puking over the side of the car—puking! And then he stops in the park and tries to—— Oh, Christ, I want to have a good time! You don't think I have it sewing hooks an' eyes on corsets down at Werber & Jacobs? Nights I wanta get out, Joe, I wanta go places, have fun! But I don't want things like him crawling on me, worse than filthy cockroaches!

JOE: Hush up!

MOTHER (*faintly from another room*): Joe—Myra . . . (*She moans.*)

MYRA (*frightened*): What's that?

JOE: It's Mother, she's sick, she's— (MYRA runs out hall door and the lights come up again)—dead!

SILVA: What?

JOE: Nothing. You want some perfume?

SILVA: What kinda perfume?

JOE: Carnation.

SILVA: Naw. I resent the suggestion. (*The MOVERS crowd in again.*)

1ST MOVER (*to 3RD MOVER*): Quit horsin' around on a job. Git them rugs.

3RD MOVER: Awright, straw boss. They should've put in a pinch-hitter. Meighan or Flowers.

2ND MOVER: Flowers? He couldn't hit an elephant's ass. Grab an end a the sofa. Hup!

4TH MOVER: Cabbage for supper nex' door.

WOMAN (*calling mournfully from the street*): May-zeeee! Oh, May-zeeee!

3RD MOVER: In that game a' Chicago . . . (*The MOVERS carry the sofa and other furniture out the entrance door. JOE removes a picture from wall.*)

SILVA (*looking up from the magazine*): Myra's, huh?

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JOE: One she had in the rotogravure, time she broke a record in the Mississippi Valley relays.

SILVA (*taking the picture*): She had a sweet shape on her, huh?

JOE: Yes.

SILVA: What makes a girl go like that?

JOE: Like what?

SILVA: You know.

JOE: No, I *don't* know! Why don't you get out of here and leave me alone?

SILVA: Because I *don't* want to. Because I'm reading a story. Because I think you're nuts.

JOE: Yeah? Gimme that picture. (*He bends over his suitcase to pack the photograph with his things and as he does so the lights dim a little and MYRA comes in. She is appreciably cheaper and more sophisticated and wears a negligee she could not have bought with her monthly salary.*)

MYRA: I wish you'd quit having that dago around the place.

JOE (*rising*): Silva?

MYRA: Yeah. I don't like the way he looks at me.

JOE: Looks at you?

MYRA: Yeh. I might as well be standing naked in front of him the way that he looks. (*JOL laughs harshly.*) You think it's funny—him looking at me that way?

JOE: Yes. It *is* funny.

MYRA: My sense a the comical don't quite agree with yours.

JOE (*looking at her*): You're getting awfully skittish—objecting to guys looking at you.

MYRA: Well, that boy is repulsive.

JOE: Because he don't live somewhere offa Ladue?

MYRA: No. Because he don't take a bath.

JOE: That's not true. Silva takes a shower ev'ry morning at the party headquarters.

MYRA: Party headquarters! You better try to associate with people that will do you some good instead of—radical dagoes and niggers an'—

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JOE: Shut up! My God, you're getting common. Snobbishness, that's always the first sign. I've never known a snob yet that wasn't fundamentally as common as dirt!

MYRA: Is it being a snob not to like dirty people?

JOE: Dirty people are what *you* run around with! Geezers in fifty dollar suits with running sores on the back of their necks. You better have your blood tested!

MYRA: You—you—you can't insult me like that! I'm going to—call Papa—tell him to—

JOE: I used to have hopes for you, Myra. But not any more. You're goin' down the toboggan like a greased pig. Take a look at yourself in the mirror. Why did Silva look at you that way? Why did the newsboy whistle when you walked past him last night? Why? 'Cause you looked like a whore—like a cheap one, Myra, one he could get for six! (MYRA looks at him, stunned, but does not answer for a moment.)

MYRA (quietly): You never would have said a thing to me like that—when Mother was living

JOE: No. When Mother was living, you wouldn't have been like this. And stayed on here in the house.

MYRA: The house? This isn't a house. It's five rooms and a bath and I'm getting out as quick as I can and I mean it! I'm not going to hang around here with a bunch of long-haired lunatics with eyes that strip the clothes off you, and then be called—dirty names!

JOE: If my sister was clean . . . I'd kill any fellow that dared to look at her that way!

MYRA: You got a swell right—you that just loaf around all day writing crap that nobody reads. You never do nothing, nothing, you don't make a cent! If I was Papa—I'd kick you out of this place so fast it would— Ahhlilih! (She turns away in disgust.)

JOE: Maybe that won't be necessary.

MYRA: Oh, no? You been saying that a long time. They'll move every stick a furniture out a this place before they do you! (She laughs and goes out. The lights come up.)

JOE (to himself): Yeah. . . . (The 1ST MOVER and 2ND MOVER come

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back and start rolling the carpet. JOE watches them and then speaks aloud.) Every stick a furniture out—before me! (*He laughs.*)

SILVA: What?

JOE: I got a card from her last week.

SILVA: Who?

JOE: Myra.

SILVA: Yeah. You told me that. (*He throws the magazine aside.*) I wonder where your old man is.

JOE: Christ. I don't know.

SILVA: Funny an old bloke like him just quittin' his job and lamming out to God knows where—after fifty—or fifty-five years of livin' a regular middle-class life.

JOE: I guess he got tired of living a regular middle-class life.

SILVA: I used to wonder what he was thinking about nights—sitting in that big overstuffed chair. (*The 3RD and 4TH MOVERS have come back and now they remove the big chair. JOE takes his shirt from the chair as they pass and slowly puts it on.*)

JOE: So did I. I'm still wondering. He never said a damn thing.

SILVA: Naw?

JOE: Just sat there, sat there, night after night after night. Well, he's gone now, they're all gone.

SILVA (*with a change of tone*): You'd better go, too.

JOE: Why don't you go on ahead an' wait for me, Silva. I'll be along in a while.

SILVA: Because I don't like the way you're acting and for some goddam reason I feel—responsible for you. You might take a notion to do a Steve Brody out one a them windows.

JOE (*laughing shortly*): For Chrissakes what would I do that for?

SILVA: Because your state of mind is abnormal. I've been lookin' at you. You're starin' off into space like something's come loose in your head. I know what you're doing. You're taking a morbid pleasure in watchin' this junk hauled off like some dopes get in mooning around a bone-orchard after somebody's laid under. This place is done for, Joe. You can't help it. (*Far down at the end of the block an organ grinder has started winding out an old blues tune of*

THE LONG GOODBYE

ten or fifteen years ago. It approaches gradually with a melancholy gaiety throughout rest of play.) Write about it some day. Call it "An Elegy for an Empty Flat." But right now my advice is to get out of here and get drunk! 'Cause the world goes on. And you've got to keep going on with it.

JOE: But not so fast that you can't even say goodbye.

SILVA: Goodbye? 'S not in my vocabulary! Hello's the word nowadays.

JOE: You're kidding yourself. You're saying goodbye all the time, every minute you live. Because that's what life is, just a long long goodbye!—(*with almost sobbing intensity*)—To one thing after another! Till you get to the last one, Silva, and that's—goodbye to yourself! (*He turns sharply to the window.*) Get out of here now, get out and leave me alone!

SILVA: Okay. But I think you're weeping like Jesus and it makes me sick. (*He begins to put on his shirt.*) I'll see you over at Weston's if I can still see. (*Grinning wryly.*) Remember, kid, what Socrates said. "Hemlock's a damn bad substitute for a twenty-six-ounce glass a beer!" (*He laughs and puts on his hat.*) So long. (*Silva goes out the door, leaving JOE in the bare room. The yellow stains on the walls, the torn peeling paper with its monotonous design, the fantastically hideous chandelier now show up in cruel relief. The sunlight through the double windows is clear and faded as weak lemon water and a fly is heard buzzing during a pause in the organ-grinder's music. The tune begins again and is drowned in the starting roar of the moving van which ebbs rapidly away. JOE walks slowly to the windows.*) CHILD (*calling in the street*): Olly—olly—oxen-free! Olly—olly—oxen-free! (*JOE looks slowly about him. His whole body contracts in a spasm of nostalgic pain. Then he grins wryly, picks up his suitcase and goes over to the door. He slips a hand to his forehead in a mocking salute to the empty room, then thrusts the hand in his pocket and goes slowly out.*) Olly—olly—oxen-free! (*Scattered shouting and laughter floats up to the room. The music is now fading.*)

SLOW CURTAIN

Hello From Bertha

C H A R A C T E R S

GOLDIE

BERTHA

LENA

GIRL

Hello From Bertha

SCENE: *A bedroom in "the valley"—a notorious red-light section along the river-flats of East St. Louis. In the centre is a massive brass bed with tumbled pillows and covers on which BERTHA, a large blonde prostitute, is lying restlessly. A heavy old-fashioned dresser with gilt knobs, gaudy silk cover and two large kewpie dolls stands against the right wall. Beside the bed is a low table with empty gin bottles. An assortment of lurid magazines is scattered carelessly about the floor. The wallpaper is grotesquely brilliant—covered with vivid magnified roses—and is torn and peeling in some places. On the ceiling are large yellow stains. An old-fashioned chandelier, fringed with red glass pendants, hangs from the centre. GOLDIE comes in at the door in the left wall. She wears a soiled double-piece dress of white and black satin, fitted closely to her almost flesless body. She stands in the doorway, smoking a cigarette, and stares impatiently at BERTHA's prostrate figure.*

GOLDIE: Well, Bertha, what are you going to do? (*For a moment there is no answer*)

BERTHA (*with faint groan*): I dunno.

GOLDIE: You've got to decide, Bertha.

BERTHA: I can't decide nothing.

GOLDIE: Why can't you?

BERTHA: I'm too tired.

GOLDIE: That's no answer.

BERTHA (*tossing fretfully*): Well, it's the only answer I know. I just want to lay here and think things over.

GOLDIE: You been layin' here thinkin' or somethin' for the past two weeks. (*BERTHA makes an indistinguishable reply.*) You got to come to some decision. The girls need this room.

BERTHA (*with boarse laugh*): Let 'em have it!

GOLDIE: They can't with you layin' here.

HELLO FROM BERTHA

BERTHA (*slapping her hand on bed*): Oh, God!

GOLDIE: Pull yourself together, now, Bertha. (*BERTHA tosses again and groans.*)

BERTHA: What's the matter with me?

GOLDIE: You're sick.

BERTHA: I got a sick headache. Who slipped me that Mickey Finn last night?

GOLDIE: Nobody give you no Mickey Finn. You been layin' here two solid weeks talkin' out of your head. Now, the sensible thing for you to do, Bertha, is to go back home or——

BERTHA: Go back nowhere!—I'm stayin' right here till I get on my feet. (*She stubbornly averts her face.*)

GOLDIE: The valley's no place for a girl in your condition. Besides we need this room.

BERTHA: Leave me be, Goldie. I wanta get in some rest before I start workin'.

GOLDIE: Bertha, you've got to decide! (*The command hangs heavily upon the room's florid atmosphere for several long moments. BERTHA slowly turns her head to GOLDIE.*)

BERTHA (*faintly*): What is it I got to decide?

GOLDIE: Where you're going from here? (*BERTHA looks at her silently for a few seconds.*)

BERTHA: Nowhere. Now leave me be, Goldie. I've got to get in my rest.

GOLDIE: If I let you be, you'd just lay here doin' nothin' from now till the crack of doom! (*BERTHA's reply is indistinguishable.*) Lissen here! If you don't make up your mind right away, I'm gonna call the ambulance squad to come get you! So you better decide right this minute.

BERTHA (*her body has stiffened slightly at this threat*): I can't decide nothing. I'm too tired—worn out.

GOLDIE: All right! (*She snaps her purse open.*) I'll take this nickel and I'll make the call right now. I'll tell 'em we got a sick girl over here who can't talk sense.

BERTHA (*thickly*): Go ahead. I don't care what happens to me now.

HELLO FROM BERTHA

GOLDIE (*changing her tactics*): Why don't you write another letter, Bertha, to that man who sells . . . hardware or something in Memphis?

BERTHA (*with sudden alertness*): Charlie? You leave his name off your dirty tongue!

GOLDIE: That's a fine way for you to be talking, me keeping you here just out of kindness and you not bringing in a red, white or blue cent for the last two weeks! Where do you——

BERTHA: Charlie's a real . . . sweet. Charlie's a . . . (*Her voice trails into a sobbing mumble.*)

GOLDIE: What if he is? All the better reason for you to write him to get you out of this here tight spot you're in, Bertha.

BERTHA (*aroused*): I'll never ask him for another dime! Get that? He's forgotten all about me, my name and everything else. (*She runs her hand slowly down her body.*) Somebody's cut me up with a knife while I been sleeping.

GOLDIE: Pull yourself together, Bertha. If this man's got money, maybe he'll send you some to help you git back on your feet.

BERTHA: Sure he's got money. He owns a hardware store. I reckon I ought to know, I used to work there! He used to say to me, Girlie, any time you need something just let Charlie know. . . . We had good times together in that back room!

GOLDIE: I bet he ain't forgotten it neither.

BERTHA: He's found out about all the bad things I done since I quit him and . . . come to St. Louis. (*She slaps the bed twice with her palm.*)

GOLDIE: Naw, he ain't, Bertha. I bet he don't know a thing. (*BERTHA laughs weakly.*)

BERTHA: It's you that's been writing him things. All the dirt you could think of about me! Your filthy tongue's been clacking so fast that——

GOLDIE: Bertha! (*BERTHA mutters an indistinguishable vulgarity.*) I been a good friend to you, Bertha.

BERTHA: Anyhow he's married now.

GOLDIE: Just write him a little note on a post-card and tell him

HELLO FROM BERTHA

you've had some tough breaks. Remind him of how he said he would help you if ever you needed it, huh?

BERTHA: Leave me alone a while, Goldie. I got an awful feeling inside of me now.

GOLDIE (*advancing a few steps and regarding BERTHA more critically*): You want to see a doctor?

BERTHA: No. (*There is a pause.*)

GOLDIE: A priest? (*BERTHA's fingers claw the sheet forward.*)

BERTHA: No!

GOLDIE: What religion are you, Bertha?

BERTHA: None.

GOLDIE: I thought you said you was Catholic once.

BERTHA: Maybe I did. What of it?

GOLDIE: If you could remember, maybe we could get some sisters or something to give you a room like they did for Rose Kramer for you to rest in, and get your strength back—huh, Bertha?

BERTHA: I don't want no sisters to give me nothing! Just leave me be in here till I get through resting.

GOLDIE: Bertha, you're . . . bad sick, Bertha!

BERTHA (*after a slight pause*): Bad?

GOLDIE: Yes, Bertha. I don't want to scare you but . . .

BERTHA (*hoarsely*): You mean I'm dying?

GOLDIE (*after a moment's consideration*): I didn't say that. (*There is another pause.*)

BERTHA: No, but you meant it.

GOLDIE: We got to provide for the future, Bertha. We can't just let things slide.

BERTHA (*attempting to sit up*): If I'm dying I want to write Charlie. I want to—tell him some things.

GOLDIE: If you mean a confession, honey, I think a priest would be——

BERTHA: No, no priest! I want Charlie!

GOLDIE: Father Callahan would——

BERTHA: No! No! I want Charlie!

HELLO FROM BERTHA

GOLDIE: Charlie's in Memphis. He's running his hardware business.

BERTHA: Yeah. On Central Avenue. The address is 563.

GOLDIE: I'll write him and tell what condition you're in, huh, Bertha?

BERTHA (*after a reflective pause*): No. . . . Just tell him I said hello. (*She turns her face to the wall.*)

GOLDIE: I gotta say more than that, Bertha.

BERTHA: That's all I want you to say. Hello from—Bertha.

GOLDIE: That wouldn't make sense, you know that.

BERTHA: Sure it would. Hello from Bertha to Charlie with all her love. Don't that make sense?

GOLDIE: No!

BERTHA: Sure it does.

GOLDIE (*turning to the door*): I better call up the hospital and get them to send out the ambulance squad.

BERTHA: No, you don't! I'd rather just die than that.

GOLDIE: You're in no condition to stay in the valley, Bertha. A girl in your shape's got to be looked out for proper or anything's likely to happen. (*Outside, in the reception room, someone has started the nickel phonograph. It is playing "The St. Louis Blues." A hoarse male voice joins in the refrain and there is a burst of laughter and the slamming of a door.*)

BERTHA (*after a slight pause*): You're telling me, sister. (*She elevates her shoulders.*) I know the rules of this game! (*She stares at GOLDIE with brilliant, faraway eyes.*) When you're out you're out and there's no come-back for you neither! (*She shakes her head and then slowly reclines again. She knots her fingers and pounds the bed several times; then her hand relaxes and slips over the side of the bed.*)

GOLDIE: Now, pull yourself together, Bertha, and I'll have you moved to a nice, clean ward where you'll get good meals and a comfortable bed to sleep in.

BERTHA: Die in, you mean! Help me outa this bed! (*She struggles to rise.*)

GOLDIE (*going to her*): Don't get excited, now, Bertha.

HELLO FROM BERTHA

BERTHA: Help me up. Yes! Where's my kimono?

GOLDIE: Bertha, you're not in any shape to go crawling around out of bed!

BERTHA: Shut up, you damned crepe-hanger! Get Lena in here. She'll help me out with my things.

GOLDIE: What've you decided on, Bertha?

BERTHA: To go.

GOLDIE: Where?

BERTHA: That's my business.

GOLDIE (*after a pause*): Well, I'll call Lena. (*BERTHA has risen painfully, and now she totters towards the dresser.*)

BERTHA: Wait a minute, you! Look under that tray. The comb and brush tray. (*She sinks, panting, into a rocker.*) You'll find five bucks stuck under there.

GOLDIE: Bertha, you ain't got no money under that tray.

BERTHA: You trying to tell me I'm broke?

GOLDIE: You been broke for ten days, Bertha. Ever since you took sick you been out of money.

BERTHA: You're a liar!

GOLDIE (*angrily*): Don't call me names, Bertha! (*They glare at each other. A GIRL, in what looks like a satin gymnasium outfit, appears in doorway and glances in curiously. She grins and disappears.*)

BERTHA (*finally*): Get Lena in here. She won't cheat me.

GOLDIE (*going to the dresser*): Look, Bertha. Just to satisfy you. See under the tray? Nothing there but an old post-card you once got from Charlie.

BERTHA (*slowly*): I been robbed. Yes, I been robbed. (*With increasing velocity.*) Just because I'm too sick an' tired an' done in to look out for myself, I get robbed! If I was in my strength, you know what I'd do? I'd bust this place wide open! I'd get back my money you stole or take it out of your hide, you old—

GOLDIE: Bertha, you spent your last dime. You bought gin with it.

BERTHA: No!

GOLDIE: It was Tuesday night, the night you got sick, you bought yourself a quart of dry gin that night. I swear you did, Bertha!

HELLO FROM BERTHA

BERTHA: I wouldn't believe your dying word on a Bible! Get Lena in here! It's a franc-up! (*She rises and staggers towards the door.*) Lena! Lena! *Get me police headquarters!*

GOLDIE (*alarmed*): No, Bertha!

BERTHA (*still louder*): GET ME POLICE HEADQUARTERS! (*Collapsing with weakness against the side of the door, she sobs bitterly and covers her eyes with one hand. The electric phonograph starts again. There is the shuffling of dancers outside.*)

GOLDIE: Bertha, be calm. Settle down here now.

BERTHA (*turning on her*): Don't tell me to be calm, you old slut. Get me police headquarters quick or I'll——! (*GOLDIE catches her arm and they struggle but BERTHA wrenches free.*) I'll report this robbery to the police if it's the last thing I do! You'd steal the pennies off a dead nigger's eyes, that's how big-hearted you are! You come in here and try to soft-soap me about priests and confessions and— GET ME POLICE HEADQUARTERS! (*She pounds the wall, and sobs.*)

GOLDIE (*helplessly*): Bertha, you need a good bromide. Get back in bed, honey, and I'll bring you a double bromide and a box of aspirin.

BERTHA (*rapidly, with eyes shut, head thrown back and hands clenched*): You'll bring me back my twenty-five dollars you stole from under that comb and brush tray!

GOLDIE: Now, Bertha——

BERTHA (*without changing her position*): You'll bring it back or I'll have you prosecuted! (*Her tense lips quiver; a shining thread of saliva dribbles down her chin. She stands like a person in a catatonic trance.*) I've got friends in this town. Big shots! (*Exultantly.*) Lawyers, politicians! *I can beat any God damn rap you try to hang on me!* (*Her eyes flare open.*) *Vagrancy, bub?* (*She laughs wildly.*) That's a laugh, ain't it! I got my constitutional rights!

(*Her laughter dies out and she staggers to the rocker and sinks into it. GOLDIE watches her with extreme awe. Then she edges cautiously past BERTHA and out the door with a frightened gasp.*)

BERTHA: Oh, Charlie, Charlie, you were such a sweet, sweet! (*Her head rocks and she smiles in agony.*) You done me dirt more

HELLO FROM BERTHA

times than I could count, Charlie—stood me up, married a little choir-singer— Oh, God! I love you so much it makes my guts ache to look at your blessed face in the picture! (*Her ecstasy fades and the look of schizophrenic suspicion returns.*) Where's that hell-cat gone to? Where's my ten dollars? Hey, **YOU!** Come back in here with that money! I'll brain you if ever I catch you monkeying around with any money belonging to me! . . . Oh, Charlie . . . I got a sick headache, Charlie. No, honey. Don't go out tonight. (*She gets up from the rocker.*) Hey, you! Bring me a cold ice-pack—my head's aching. I got one hell of a hang-over, baby! (*She laughs.*) Vagrancy, huh? Vagrancy your Aunt Fanny! Get me my lawyer. I got influence in this town. Yeah. My folks own half the oil wells in the state of—of—Nevada. (*She laughs.*) Yeah, that's a laugh, ain't it? (**LENA**, a dark Jewish girl in pink satin trunks and blouse, comes in the door. **BERTHA** looks at her with half-opened eyes.) Who're you?

LENA: It's me, Lena.

BERTHA: Oh. Lena, huh? Set down an' take a load off yer 'feet. Have a cigarette, honey. I ain't feeling good. There ain't any cigarettes here. Goldie took 'em. She takes everything I got. Set down an'—take a——

LENA (*in doorway*): Goldie told me you weren't feelin' so good this evening so I thought I'd just look in on you, honey.

BERTHA: Yeah, that's a laugh, ain't it? I'm all right. I'll be on the job again tonight. You bet. I always come through, don't I, kid? Ever known me to quit? I may be a little down on my luck right now but—that's all! (*She pauses, as if for agreement.*) That's all, ain't it, Lena? I ain't old. I still got my looks. Ain't I?

LENA: Sure you have, Bertha. (*There is a pause.*)

BERTHA: Well, what're you grinning about?

LENA: I ain't grinning, Bertha.

BERTHA (*herself slightly smiling*): I thought maybe you thought there was something funny about me saying I still had my looks.

LENA (*after a pause*): No, Bertha, you got me wrong.

BERTHA (*boarsely*): Listen, sweetheart, I know the Mayor of this God damn little burg. Him and me are like that. See? I can

HELLO FROM BERTHA

beat any rap you try to hang on me and I don't give a damn what. Vagrancy, huh? That's a sweet laugh to me! Get me my travelling bag, will you, Lena? Where is it? I been thrown out of better places than this. (*She rises and drags herself vaguely about the room and then collapses on bed. LENA moves towards the bed.*) God, I'm too tired. I'll just lay down till my head stops swimmin'. . . . (*GOLDIE appears in the doorway. She and LENA exchange significant glances.*)

GOLDIE: Well, Bertha, have you decided yet?

BERTHA: Decided what?

GOLDIE: What you're gonna do?

BERTHA: Leave me be. I'm too tired.

GOLDIE (*casually*): Well, I've called up the hospital, Bertha. They're sending an ambulance around to get you. They're going to put you up in a nice clean ward.

BERTHA: Tell 'em to throw me in the river and save the state some money. Or maybe they're scared I'd pollute the water. I guess they'll have to cremate me to keep from spreadin' infection. Only safe way of disposin' of Bertha's remains. 'That's a sweet laugh' ain't it? Look at her, Lena, that slut that calls herself Goldie. She thinks she's big-hearted. Ain't that a laugh? The only thing big about her is the thing that she sits on. Yeah, the old horse! She comes in here talking soft about callin' a priest an' havin' me stuck in the charity ward. Not me. None a that stuff for me, I'll tell you!

GOLDIE (*with controlled fury*): You better watch how you talk. They'll have you in the strait-jacket. that's what!

BERTHA (*suddenly rising*): Get the hell out! (*She throws a glass at GOLDIE, who screams and runs out. BERTHA then turns to LENA.*) Set down and take a letter for me. There's paper under that kewpie.

LENA (*looking on the dresser*): No, there ain't, Bertha.

BERTHA: Ain't? I been robbed a that, too! (*LENA walks to the table by the bed and pucks up a tablet.*)

LENA: Here's a piece, Bertha.

BERTHA: All right. Take a letter. To Mr. Charlie Aldrich, owner of the biggest hardware store in the City of Memphis. Got that?

HELLO FROM BERTHA

LENA: What's the address, Bertha?

BERTHA: It's 563 Central Avenue. Got it? Yeah, that's right. Mr. Charlie Aldrich. Dear Charlie. They're fixing to lock me up in the city bug-house. On a charge of criminal responsibility without due process of law. Got that? (*LENA stops writing.*) And I'm as sane as you are right this minute, Charlie. There's nothing wrong with my upper-story and there never will be. Got that? (*LENA looks down and pretends to write.*) So come on down here, Charlie, and bail me out of here, honey, for old times' sake. Love and kisses, your old sweetheart, Bertha. . . . Wait a minute. Put a P.S. and say how's the wife and your—— No! Scratch it out! That don't belong in there. Scratch it all out, the whole damn thing! (*There is a painful silence. BERTHA sighs and turns slowly on the bed, pushing her damp hair back.*) Get you a clean sheet of paper. (*LENA rises and tears another sheet from the tablet. A young GIRL sticks her head in the door.*)

GIRL: Lena!

LENA: Coming.

BERTHA: Got it?

LENA: Yes.

BERTHA: That's right. Now just say this. Hello from Bertha—to Charlie—with all her love. Got that? Hello from Bertha—to Charlie . . .

LENA (*rising and straightening her blouse*): Yes.

BERTHA: With all . . . her love . . . (*The music in the outer room recommences.*)

CURTAIN

This Property is Condemned

C H A R A C T È R S

WILLIE

A young girl

TOM

A boy

This Property is Condemned

SCENE: *A railroad embankment on the outskirts of a small Mississippi town on one of those milky white winter mornings peculiar to that part of the country. The air is moist and chill. Behind the low embankment of the tracks is a large yellow frame house which has a look of tragic vacancy. Some of the upper windows are boarded, a portion of the roof has fallen away. The land is utterly flat. In the left background is a bill-board that says "GIN WITH JAKE" and there are some telephone poles and a few bare winter trees. The sky is a great milky whiteness: crows occasionally make a sound of roughly torn cloth.*

The girl WILLIE is advancing precariously along the railroad track, balancing herself with both arms outstretched, one clutching a banana, the other an extraordinarily dilapidated doll with a frothy blond wig. She is a remarkable apparition—thin as a beanpole and dressed in outrageous cast-off finery. She wears a long blue velvet party dress with a filthy cream lace collar and sparkling rhinestone beads. On her feet are battered silver kid slippers with large ornamental buckles. Her wrists and her fingers are resplendent with dime-store jewellery. She has applied rouge to her childish face in artless crimson daubs and her lips are made up in a preposterous Cupid's bow. She is about thirteen and there is something ineluctably childlike and innocent in her appearance despite the make-up. She laughs frequently and wildly and with a sort of precocious, tragic abandon.

The boy TOM, slightly older, watches her from below the embankment. He wears corduroy pants, blue shirt and a sweater and carries a kite of red tissue paper with a gaudily ribboned tail.

TOM: Hello. Who are you?

WILLIE: Don't talk to me till I fall off. (*She proceeds dizzily. TOM watches with mute fascination. Her gyrations grow wider and wider. She speaks breathlessly.*) Take my—crazy doll—will you?

TOM (*scrambling up the bank*): Yeh.

WILLIE: I don't wanta—break her when—I fall! I don't think I can—stay on much—longer—do you?

THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED

TOM : Naw.

WILLIE: I'm practically—off—right now! (TOM offers to assist her.) No, don't touch me. It's no fair helping. You've got to do it—all—by yourself! God, I'm wobbling! I don't know what's made me so nervous! You see that water-tank way back yonder?

TOM: Yeah?

WILLIE: That's where I—started—from! This is the furthest—I ever gone—without once—falling off. I mean it will be—if I can manage to stick on—to the next—telephone—pole! Oh! Here I go! (*She becomes completely unbalanced and rolls down the bank.*)

TOM (*standing above her now*): Hurtcha self?

WILLIE: Skinned my knee a little. Glad I didn't put my silk stockings on.

TOM (*coming down the bank*): Spit on it. That takes the sting away.

WILLIE: Okay.

TOM: That's animal's medicine, you know. They always lick their wounds.

WILLIE: I know. The principal damage was done to my bracelet, I guess. I knocked out one of the diamonds. Where did it go?

TOM: You never could find it in all them cinders.

WILLIE: I don't know. It had a lot of shine.

TOM: It wasn't a genuine diamond.

WILLIE: How do you know?

TOM: I just imagine it wasn't. Because if it was you wouldn't be walking along a railroad track with a banged-up doll and a piece of a rotten banana.

WILLIE: Oh, I wouldn't be so sure. I might be peculiar or something. You never can tell. What's your name?

TOM: Tom.

WILLIE: Mine's Willie. We've both got boy's names.

TOM: How did that happen?

WILLIE: I was expected to be a boy but I wasn't. They had one girl already. Alva. She was my sister. Why ain't you at school?

TOM: I thought it was going to be windy so I could fly my kite.

THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED

WILLIE: What made you think that?

TOM: Because the sky was so white.

WILLIE: Is that a sign?

TOM: Yeah.

WILLIE: I know. It looks like everything had been swept off with a broom. Don't it?

TOM: Yeah.

WILLIE: It's perfectly white. It's white as a clean piece of paper.

TOM: Uh-huh.

WILLIE: But there isn't a wind.

TOM: Naw.

WILLIE: It's up too high for us to feel it. It's way, way up in the attic sweeping the dust off the furniture up there!

TOM: Uh-huh. Why ain't you at school?

WILLIE: I quit^{ted}. Two years ago this winter.

TOM: What grade was you in?

WILLIE: Five A.

TOM: Miss Preston.

WILLIE: Yep. She used to think my hands was dirty until I explained that it was cinders from falling off the railroad tracks so much.

TOM: She's pretty strict.

WILLIE: Oh, no, she's just disappointed because she didn't get married. Probably never had an opportunity, poor thing. So she has to teach Five A for the rest of her natural life. They started teaching algebra an' I didn't give a goddam what X stood for so I quit.

TOM: You'll never get an education walking the railroad tracks.

WILLIE: You won't get one flying a red kite neither. Besides . . .

TOM: What?

WILLIE: What a girl needs to get along is social training. I learned all of that from my sister Alva. She had a wonderful popularity with the railroad men.

TOM: Train engineers?

THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED

WILLIE: Engineers, firemen, conductors. Even the freight sup'rintendent. We run a boarding-house for railroad men. She was I guess you might say The Main Attraction. Beautiful? Jesus, she looked like a movie star!

TOM: Your sister?

WILLIE: Yeah. One of 'em used to bring her regular after each run a great big heart-shaped red-silk box of assorted chocolates and nuts and hard candies. Marvellous?

TOM: Yeah. (*The cawing of crows sounds through the chilly air.*)

WILLIE: You know where Alva is now?

TOM: Memphis?

WILLIE: Naw.

TOM: New Awleuns?

WILLIE: Naw.

TOM: St. Louis?

WILLIE: You'll never guess.

TOM: Where is she then? (*WILLIE does not answer at once.*)

WILLIE (*very solemnly*): She's in the bone-orchard.

TOM: What?

WILLIE (*violently*): Bone-orchard, cemetery, graveyard! Don't you understand English?

TOM: Sure. That's pretty tough.

WILLIE: You don't know the half of it, buddy. We used to have some high old times in that big yellow house.

TOM: I bet you did.

WILLIE: Musical instruments going all of the time.

TOM: Instruments? What kind?

WILLIE: Piano, victrola, Hawaiian steel guitar. Everyone played on something. But now it's—awful quiet. You don't hear a sound from there, do you?

TOM: Naw. Is it empty?

WILLIE: Except for me. They got a big sign stuck up.

TOM: What does it say?

WILLIE (*loudly but with a slight catch*): "THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED!"

THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED

TOM: You ain't still living there?

WILLIE: Uh-huh.

TOM: What happened? Where did everyone go?

WILLIE: Mama run off with a brakeman on the C. & E. I. After that everything went to pieces. (*A train whistles far off.*) You hear that whistle? That's the Cannonball Express. The fastest thing on wheels between St. Louis, New Awleuns an' Memphis. My old man got to drinking.

TOM: Where is he now?

WILLIE: Disappeared. I guess I ought to refer his case to the Bureau of Missing Persons. The same as he done with Mama when she disappeared. Then there was me and Alva. Till Alva's lungs got affected. Did you see Greta Garbo in *Camille*? It played at the Delta Brilliant one time las' spring. She had the same what Alva died of. Lung affection.

TOM: Yeah?

WILLIE: Only it was—very beautiful the way she had it. You know. Violins playing. And loads and loads of white flowers. All of her lovers come back in a beautiful scene!

TOM: Yeah?

WILLIE: But Alva's all disappeared.

TOM: Yeah?

WILLIE: Like rats from a sinking ship! That's how she used to describe it. Oh, it--wasn't like death in the movies.

TOM: Naw!

WILLIE: She says, "Where is Albert? Where's Clemence?" None of them was around. I used to lie to her, I says, "They send their regards. They're coming to see you tomorrow." "Where's Mr. Johnson?" she asked me. He was the freight sup'rintendent, the most important character we ever had in our rooming-house. "He's been transferred to Grenada," I told her. "But wishes to be remembered." She known I was lying.

TOM: Yeah?

WILLIE: "This here is the pay-off!" she says. "They all run out on me like rats from a sinking ship!" Except Sidney.

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TOM: Who was Sidney?

WILLIE: The one that used to give her the great big enormous red-silk box of American Beauty choc'lates.

TOM: Oh.

WILLIE: He remained faithful to her.

TOM: That's good.

WILLIE: But she never did care for Sidney. She said his teeth was decayed so he didn't smell good.

TOM: Aw!

WILLIE: It wasn't like death in the movies. When somebody dies in the movies they play violins.

TOM: But they didn't for Alva.

WILLIE: Naw. Not even a goddam victrola. They said it didn't agree with the hospital regulations. Always singing around the house.

TOM: Who? Alva?

WILLIE: Throwing enormous parties. This was her favourite number. (*She closes her eyes and stretches out her arms in the simulated rapture of the professional blues singer Her voice is extraordinarily high and pure with a precocious emotional timbre.*)

You're the only star
In my blue hea-ven
- And you're shining just
For me!

This is her clothes I got on. Inherited from her. Everything Alva's is mine. Except her solid gold beads.

TOM: What happened to them?

WILLIE: Them? She never took 'em off.

TOM: Oh!

WILLIE: I've also inherited all of my sister's beaux. Albert and Clemence and even the freight sup'rintendent.

TOM: Yeah?

WILLIE: They all disappeared. Afraid that they might get stuck for expenses I guess. But now they turn up again, all of 'em, like

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a bunch of bad pennies. They take me out places at night. I've got to be popular now. To parties an' dances an' all of the railroad affairs. Lookit here!

TOM: What?

WILLIE: I can do bumps! (*She stands in front of him and shoves her stomach towards him in a series of spasmodic jerks.*)

TOM: Frank Waters said that . . .

WILLIE: What?

TOM: You know.

WILLIE: Know what?

TOM: You took him inside and danced for him with your clothes off.

WILLIE: Oh. Crazy Doll's hair needs washing. I'm scared to wash it though 'cause her head might come unglued where she had that compound fracture of the skull. I think that most of her brains spilled out. She's been acting silly ever since. Saying an' doing the most outrageous things.

TOM: Why don't you do that for me?

WILLIE: What? Put glue on your compound fracture?

TOM: Naw. What you did for Frank Waters.

WILLIE: Because I was lonesome then an' I'm not lonesome now. You can tell Frank Waters that. Tell him that I've inherited all of my sister's beaux. I go out steady with men in responsible jobs. The sky sure is white. Ain't it? White as a clean piece of paper. In Five A we used to draw pictures. Miss Preston would give us a piece of white foolscap an' tell us to draw what we pleased

TOM: What did you draw?

WILLIE: I remember I drawn her a picture one time of my old man getting conked with a bottle. She thought it was good, Miss Preston, she said, "Look here. Here's a picture of Charlie Chaplin with his hat on the side of his head!" I said, "Aw, naw, that's not Charlie Chaplin, that's my father, an' that's not his hat, it's a bottle!"

TOM: What did she say?

WILLIE: Oh, well. You can't make a school-teacher laugh.

You're the only star
In my blue hea-VEN .

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The principal used to say there must've been something wrong with my home atmosphere because of the fact that we took in railroad men an' some of 'em slept with my sister.

TOM: Did they?

WILLIE: She was The Main Attraction. The house is sure empty now.

TOM: You ain't still living there, are you?

WILLIE: Sure.

TOM: By yourself?

WILLIE: Uh-huh. I'm not supposed to be but I am. The property is condemned but there's nothing wrong with it. Some county investigator come snooping around yesterday. I recognized her by the shape of her hat. It wasn't exactly what I would call stylish-looking.

TOM: Naw?

WILLIE: It looked like something she took off the lid of the stove. Alva knew lots about style. She had ambitions to be a designer for big wholesale firms in Chicago. She used to submit her pictures. It never worked out.

You're the only star
In my blue hea-ven . . .

TOM: What did you do? About the investigators?

WILLIE: Laid low upstairs. Pretended like no one was home.

TOM: Well, how do you manage to keep on eating?

WILLIE: Oh, I don't know. You keep a sharp look-out you see things lying around. This banana, perfectly good, for instance. Thrown in a garbage pail in back of the Blue Bird Café. (*She finishes the banana and tosses away the peel.*)

TOM (*grinning*): Yeh. Miss Preston for instance.

WILLIE: Naw, not her. She gives you a white piece of paper, says "Draw what you please!" One time I drawn her a picture of — Oh, but I told you that, huh? Will you give Frank Waters a message?

TOM: What?

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WILLIE: Tell him the freight sup'rintendent has bought me a pair of kid slippers. Patent. The same as the old ones of Alva's. I'm going to dances with them at Moon Lake Casino. All night I'll be dancing an' come home drunk in the morning! We'll have serenades with all kinds of musical instruments. Tumpets an' trombones. An' Hawaiian steel guitars. Yeh! Yeh! (*She rises excitedly.*) The sky will be white like this.

TOM (*impressed*): Will it?

WILLIE: Uh-huh. (*She smiles vaguely and turns slowly towards him.*) White—as a clean—piece of paper . . . (*then excitedly*) I'll draw—pictures on it!

TOM: Will you?

WILLIE: Sure!

TOM: Pictures of what?

WILLIE: Me dancing! With the freight sup'rintendent! In a pair of patent kid shoes! Yeh! Yeh! With French heels on them as high as telegraph poles! An' they'll play my favourite music!

TOM: Your favourite?

WILLIE: Yeh. The same as Alva's. (*Breathlessly, passionately*)

You're the only STAR—
In my blue HEA-VEN . . .

I'll—

TOM: What?

WILLIE: I'll wear a corsage!

TOM: What's that?

WILLIE: Flowers to pin on your dress at a formal affair! Rosebuds! Violets! And lilies-of-the-valley! When you come home it's withered but you stick 'em in a bowl of water to freshen 'em up.

TOM: Uh-huh.

WILLIE: That's what Alva done. (*She pauses, and in the silence the train whistles.*) The Cannonball Express . . .

TOM: You think a lot about Alva. Don't you?

• WILLIE: Oh, not so much. Now an' then. It wasn't like death in the movies. Her beaux disappeared. An' they didn't have violins playing. I'm going back now.

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TOM: Where to, Willie?

WILLIE: The water-tank.

TOM: Yeah?

WILLIE: An' start all over again. Maybe I'll break some kind of continuous record. Alva did once. At a dance marathon in Mobile. Across the state line. Alabama. You can tell Frank Waters everything that I told you. I don't have time for inexperienced people. I'm going out now with popular railroad men, men with good salaries, too. Don't you believe me?

TOM: No. I think you're drawing an awful lot on your imagination.

WILLIE: Well, if I wanted to I could prove it. But you wouldn't be worth convincing. (*She smooths out Crazy Doll's hair.*) I'm going to live for a long, long time like my sister. An' when my lungs get affected I'm going to die like she did—maybe not like in the movies, with violins playing—but with my pearl earrings on an' my solid gold beads from Memphis. . . .

TOM: Yes?

WILLIE (*examining Crazy Doll very critically*): An' then I guess---

TOM: What?

WILLIE (*gaily but with a slight catch*): Somebody else will inherit all of my beaux! The sky sure is white.

TOM: It sure is.

WILLIE: White as a clean piece of paper. I'm going back now.

TOM: So long.

WILLIE: Yeh. So long. (*She starts back along the railroad track, weaving grotesquely to keep her balance. She disappears. TOM wets his finger and holds it up to test the wind. WHISTLE is heard singing from a distance.*)

You're the only star
In my blue heaven—

(*There is a brief pause. The stage begins to darken.*)

An' you're shining just—
For me!

CURTAIN